# THE 3 INVESTIGATORS in

# THE CASE OF THE DUBIOUS FRIEND

**in**

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In the idyllic neighbourhood of Seven Pines, tensions are rising between the local residents and a group of campers occupying an adjacent piece of land. Following a series of incidents, angry residents turn to The Three Investigators for help in resolving the issue. Jupiter and Pete start by staking out the area to observe the activities of the campers. When Bob is rushing to join them, he is injured in an accident and loses his memory. However, he is saved and looked after by… of all people, their opponents—the campers—but luckily, one of them happens to be his friend.

The Three Investigators
in

# The Case of the Dubious Friend

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# 1. Bad Luck All the Way

Bob Andrews looked impatiently at the display on the petrol pump. He was already very late for an appointment. Why hadn't he filled up the day before? Why had his mother delayed him? And why did all the traffic lights have to be on red today? Everything was against him!

Grimly, he noticed that petrol prices had gone up again. That would significantly impact his budget. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the tank was full. Bob sighed with relief—even though he knew his friends, Jupiter Jones and Pete Crenshaw, were probably fuming by now.

The three boys, who ran a flourishing investigation agency in their spare time, had arranged to meet at half past two sharp. They had received an assignment over the phone in the morning and now wanted to meet their new client, an old lady named Cynthia McGowan. However, now it was already a quarter to three. Jupiter did not like it at all when people were late for an appointment. In his opinion, punctuality was part of making a good impression.

Bob hung the nozzle back in its holder. A seagull swooped greedily down on the full rubbish bin right next to him. He shooed it away. "Get lost!"

The seagull fluttered up, let out a scream, and left a big white spot on the windscreen of Bob's Beetle.

"Hey!" Bob shouted after the bird. "You pesky—"

Frustrated, he reached for a bucket of water—only to find it empty, as if the situation wasn't stressful enough. It just wasn't Bob's day. Dang, it wasn't even his week!

With the empty bucket in hand, he hurried behind the petrol station building. Honestly, it probably wasn't even his month. Everything had conspired against him—except, miraculously, the water tap nestled near a cluster of large waste containers. Somehow that little marvel was working flawlessly.

While he filled the bucket, he peered between the containers at the small car park behind the petrol station. Parked there was a Beetle that looked even older and more rickety than his own. It was painted purple. Pete Crenshaw, the Second Investigator, would certainly have said, at the sight of it, that nobody should do that to cars.

For the fun of it, Bob took out his phone to capture the monstrosity for Pete, knowing it would provoke a classic rant. After saving the image, he quickly lost interest in the vehicle, as he preferred to deal with people rather than motor vehicles.

He found the young woman standing next to the Beetle much more interesting than her car. She had unruly red curls and actually managed to look even weirder than her Beetle. Everything from her yellow knee socks to the awkwardly cut, poison-green skirt looked grotesque. Nevertheless, her companion seemed genuinely engaged, as they conversed with enthusiasm. He was a strikingly tall man in his late thirties with a military crew-cut.

Apparently a third person was also involved in the conversation, but Bob could not see him from where he was standing. As far as he could tell, it was not a relaxed conversation. The woman was nervous. She kept pushing her purple sunglasses into her hair with trembling fingers, only to put them back on her nose immediately afterwards.

A gust of wind carried snatches of their conversation to Bob. "This can't be… I'm… I need help!"

Finally, with a hasty gesture of farewell, she got into her Beetle. For a moment, Bob expected the vehicle to fall apart, but it started without a hitch. The little car backed up with a lot of momentum, turned, and then zoomed past Bob—much faster than he would have thought.

Bob carried the full bucket back to his car. Halfway there, he turned around again. Now he could see who the third person had been. It was a young man who was just getting into a decrepit Jeep. Bob almost dropped the bucket in astonishment.

"Skinny Norris!" he gasped and quickly turned around so that Skinny would not see him. There was simply no time for meeting him now, as a confrontation was bound to happen when one of The Three Investigators met Skinny.

E. Skinner Norris had been a kind of arch-enemy of The Three Investigators for years. He was a little older than the three boys and came from a wealthy home. However, as he had often run afoul of the law, his father had cut him off at some point. As a result, Skinny was always on the lookout for an opportunity to get shady jobs to supplement his cash. The Three Investigators had already got in his way several times—a fact that Skinny resented very much. It would have been better if there had been no confrontation today. Bob was in a bad enough mood as it was. A conversation with Skinny was guaranteed to ruin his day completely.

He grabbed a rag and began to clean his windscreen. As he did so, he thought—there was nothing criminal about Skinny meeting bizarre people at a petrol station. After all, it was not illegal to meet and talk in a public car park. However, with Skinny Norris, nobody knew what he was up to.

Bob wrung out the rag. White-brown liquid dripped into the bucket of water. Bob scowled. Wherever Skinny appeared, there was trouble. It was almost a law of nature. As excited as the red-haired woman had seemed, it had not been a normal conversation. There was more to it than that. On the other hand, The Three Investigators already had a case, and it would start without him if he didn't hurry up.

Bob reached for the dispenser with the paper towels, which was placed next to the petrol pumps. There was only one tissue left, and it was not enough to dry his hands properly. Bob suppressed a curse. He shook the dirty water off his hands and jumped into the car. Finally, he could get going.

Only how? The exit was just blocked by a woman in a van, frantically manoeuvring it back and forth to let a huge truck pass.

"She probably won her driver's licence in a lottery!" Bob exclaimed. "It can't be that hard."

Apparently the woman didn't think so. She spun her van around even more frantically without really moving from where she was. So the only way out for Bob was through the other exit behind the petrol station.

Bob put his car in reverse. The Beetle made an ungracious noise. "Don't let me down now, old boy!" he implored his car. It worked. The Beetle seemed to have a sympathetic ear for its stressed owner. At least someone was on Bob's side, even if it was only his car.

Suddenly, in the rear-view mirror, he saw a vehicle approaching fast. It was Skinny's Jeep!

Bob slammed his foot on the brake pedal, causing the Beetle to jerk abruptly. Skinny's car swerved. Brakes squealed, and the Jeep skidded towards an advertisement board and grazed a flower pot. Then it came to a stop.

"Idiot!" Skinny yelled from his car.

Bob closed his eyes, gripping the steering wheel to steady himself. In a moment, Skinny would drive on. Bob waited. Any moment now the Jeep had to move on. He heard the car make a chugging noise. Then it was quiet again… followed by another chug, a rattle… and smoke rising from the side of the bonnet. This couldn't be happening!

Bob looked nervously out of the window. Skinny had got out and was opening the bonnet. He looked up and saw Bob. "Great! Now this thing won't run again! I have you to thank for that, Andrews! You and your junk car!"

"It's not my fault your car can't survive a simple brake application. Besides, you were going way too fast. This is a petrol station, not a race track!"

"Shut up, Andrews!"

"I say as I please!" Bob eyed his nemesis with amusement, who was bent over the engine. Skinny reached in and poked around at something and obviously didn't know what to do.

"You're going to wreck the car more than it already is!" Bob could not suppress this remark. He was irritated, and now he had found someone to take it out on—as unfair as that might be.

"Shut up, Andrews! I need to concentrate."

"Let me guess, Skinny—you did some shady job again and got paid less than expected, right? And then you had to pawn your sports car to pay your rent. After that, of course, all you had left was this rusty smoke dispenser."

Skinny's expression shifted, confirming Bob had hit the mark.

"You know, Skinny," Bob continued, "you should just learn from all your failures and mishaps and get an honest job. Then you'll be able to pay your rent."

Skinny looked up. "Laugh all you want! One day, I'm going to get back at you 'Three Instigators'! You can bet on that!"

"You've got to wake up pretty early in the morning to even try to do that," Bob replied, and meanwhile, he had discovered that the exit had become free. "Let's face it, Skinny—you don't stand a chance against The Three Investigators!" He laughed.

"We'll see about that, Andrews!" he roared. "One of these days you're going to regret your arrogance. He who laughs last laughs best!"

Driving off, Bob glanced back just as Skinny slammed the bonnet shut, the metal rumbling with his anger.

## 2. Deadly Buns

It was already past three o'clock. Bob stepped on the accelerator. From the petrol station it was only a short distance to Seven Pines, the home of their new client.

The relatively new residential area was just north of the coastal road to Malibu. The road led downhill in shallow curves, past small eucalyptus groves, a tiny little park with a small playground and many new houses with gleaming façades and large garages.

He looked at the note with the address—101 Hortensia Drive, Seven Pines. He was at his destination.

Bob parked his Beetle in front of a yellow wooden house. It stood out from the surrounding houses with their meticulously manicured gardens and wide driveways. While the lawn was mowed, it lacked the precise, ruler-straight appearance characteristic of the other properties. Additionally, the absence of a station wagon, a common sight in front of the surrounding houses, further set it apart.

Jupiter's and Pete's bicycles were standing by the wooden fence that surrounded the property. So as expected, they were already here.

Bob opened the garden gate. He walked through a lushly planted front garden with a small goldfish pond. At the front door, he pressed an old-fashioned bell button. Nothing happened for a while, then he heard footsteps. The curtain in front of the glass window in the door was pushed aside and an elderly woman looked out at him. She opened the door narrowly, stopped by the security chain. "What do you want?"

"I'm Bob Andrews, ma'am," he introduced himself. "—Of The Three Investigators."

The door opened. Cynthia McGowan smiled. "Please excuse me. You can never be too careful. Who knows who's ringing the doorbell these days… but we've been expecting you."

With slow steps, she led Bob down the hall to a living room. Although it was actually a large room, it seemed very small at first sight. The air was stuffy. The walls were hung full of family photos. There were several armchairs and a couch, all covered with protective plastic covers. On the couch sat Pete and Jupiter.

"Why don't you sit down?" Mrs McGowan pointed to the couch.

"Mrs McGowan has just reported to us that there have been a number of unpleasant occurrences here in the neighbourhood," said Jupiter. "She fears that the perpetrators may also be targeting her house."

"Terrible, isn't it?" Mrs McGowan took a cup from a glass cabinet. "Makes you feel unsafe in your own home. Would you like some blackberry tea?"

Bob looked up. "I'd love some."

The woman poured a dark liquid from a jug into the cup. "Only last week, Mr Hopkins's shed was smeared with black paint… and then someone broke into the Stewards' garage," she recounted with concern. "That's not all, as several gardens were vandalized recently. The perpetrators ripped out Lance's tulips in the process… He was devastated!"

"So there has been a break-in and cases of vandalism…" Bob asked with moderate interest.

"You bet!" Mrs McGowan handed him the cup. "—And we know who did it too!" She sat down.

“You know who is behind it? Then why do you need our help?” asked Pete.

“We can’t prove anything to those heartless scoundrels.” Mrs McGowan looked distressed. “In any case, I wouldn’t stand for this at all. As I can remember, a lot of things were different before my husband passed away five years ago.” She looked down at the floor in sorrow. “—And then the police also think we can handle it ourselves. Sheriff Brewer doesn’t care about anything… and those scoundrels are sure to strike again. Next time it might be my roses, my goldfish, or even worse, my family photos!”

Pete had to try hard not to laugh.

Jupiter, on the other hand, remained composed. “Ma’am, it would be helpful if you told us the whole story from the beginning.”

“Of course!” The woman thought for a moment. “Only, where should I even start? Perhaps with the garage break-in? Or perhaps better with the flower beds of dear Dorothy. That’s a terrible story too!”

“I think we can leave those details out for now.” Bob tried to cut things short. That was as far as he got as the front doorbell sounded.

“Who could that be?” asked Mrs McGowan in surprise. “I never get visitors at this time.” She got up and went back into the hall.

When Mrs McGowan was out of earshot, Jupiter said to Bob softly, “You’re more than half an hour late!”

“Yes, and we had to sit in this family crypt all this time, eating raisin buns and drinking blackberry tea,” whispered Pete, “and I don’t even like raisins.”

“Well, it’s not my fault!” Bob hissed back. “I had to… Oh, never mind!” He collected himself. “By the way, I ran into an old acquaintance—Skinny Norris! He was loitering at the petrol station up Hillwood Terrace, talking to a pretty wacky woman and some giant with a crew cut.”

“What?” The First Investigator’s expression changed abruptly. “Actually, when Skinny shows up somewhere, there’s always trouble. He’s probably planning a robbery at the petrol station or blackmailing someone. I’d believe anything of him now.”

Bob wanted to say, “Me too,” but he choked on a raisin instead. “These buns…” he hacked, catching his breath, “… are deadly!”

“I warned you,” Pete remarked with a grin.

“I’d like to put the subject of buns to rest,” Jupiter intervened, “just like the subject of Skinny Norris. We mustn’t forget that we already have a case.”

“Well, we’re supposed to be looking for some guys who pull out tulips. That’s not exactly a case for us, is it?” replied Pete quietly.

“We should first learn whatever we can from the events here.” Jupiter leaned back. “I think we are dealing with two different criminal offences. Burglars don’t usually want to draw attention to themselves. They are profit-orientated, which means they want to loot. People who vandalize, on the other hand, want to draw attention to themselves. They want to get rid of anger, show off, demonstrate power or simply annoy someone. So I can’t imagine that there is a direct link between the two incidents, unless there is some other motive behind the acts.”

Mrs McGowan came back into the living room, followed by a neatly dressed man. “My nephew, Brian Fraser, has dropped by,” Mrs McGowan said, and she pointed to The Three Investigators. “These are the three boys I hired, Brian.”

“Good afternoon,” the man greeted, revealing a perfect toothpaste smile.

“Brian spotted your bikes by the fence,” explained Mrs McGowan.

"As Aunt Cynthia told me, you are investigators. So I take it that you are looking into the deplorable incidents in our neighbourhood. I welcome that." He smiled. "—But I would like to ask you to park your bicycles behind the house in future. I just gave the fence a fresh coat of paint last week."

"No problem," said Pete, amused. He stood up. "I'll move the bikes right away."

Jupe, Bob, Mr Fraser and Cynthia McGowan followed him out.

"I don't want to sound petty, but we have had a lot of problems in our area recently. I am therefore taking great care to restore peace and order here." Mr Fraser waved to another neighbour who was watering his front yard. "That's Lance Davis. His lawn won second prize in the Southern California Garden Competition last year."

Jupiter looked over at Mr Davis. He could see from the lawn that it was indeed well cared for. All the more conspicuous were two deep furrows running through the soil.

Mr Fraser followed Jupiter's gaze. "Those ruffians from the Freeman grounds did that!" he declared angrily, "and that wasn't even the worst of it. Their actions are getting more and more aggressive and threatening. It's a shame the police haven't intervened yet."

"Mrs McGowan told us that the sheriff preferred to stay out of it," Bob said.

Mr Fraser laughed bitterly. "The man is sick all the time, and when he's not down with the flu or nursing an upset stomach, he's taking it easy. I bet he's counting the days to retirement every day."

"Isn't there a deputy?" asked Pete.

"Deputy? Ha!" Mr Fraser let out a sardonic laugh. "They have a very young officer as a deputy who could hardly keep law and order. In any case, we have lost trust in the police."

"What terrible times these are!" Mrs McGowan looked distressed. "Every night I'm afraid something will happen."

"Now you have these boys here to help you," Mr Fraser reassured his aunt. "Besides, I don't think your house is in any danger tonight. Those scoundrels are obviously well-informed about us. I'm afraid they know perfectly well that we're having our annual summer gathering tomorrow. So it stands to reason that they will tamper with the decorations, the barbecue and the tables."

"How horrible!" Mrs McGowan threw her hands up in horror. Then she turned to The Three Investigators and said, "The gathering is so important to us. Every year we have a big summer party on the little lawn next to the Stewards' house. Everyone from Seven Pines is invited."

Mr Fraser nodded. "You must know that we place great importance on this close-knit community."

"Very much worth it," his aunt confirmed.

"—But this year the gathering will probably be overshadowed by those Freeman scoundrels."

"Can't you secure the items?" asked Pete, who was leaning his bike against the wall of the garden shed.

"Of course we will! We formed a vigilante group some time ago," Mr Fraser proudly disclosed. "Tonight we will catch those scoundrels red-handed. We'll position ourselves in the old barbecue restaurant and wait to see what happens. If they even get close to the barbecues, they're in for a surprise! And if need be, there'll be a fierce confrontation."

"That's great!" Mrs McGowan beamed as if she hadn't even heard the last sentence. "If you take care of everything, I won't need the boys' help at all."

"—But…" Bob continued.

"It's okay," Pete interrupted him. "I think Mr Fraser and his neighbours will sort it out."

“Of course I want to thank you for coming, boys,” the woman said. “Wait! I have a bag of raisin buns for you as a token of appreciation for coming.”

## 3. Residents vs Campers

Half an hour later, The Three Investigators sat down in their headquarters—an old mobile home trailer located at The Jones Salvage Yard.

To maintain the trailer as a secret office and hideout, the boys had camouflaged it under a mountain pile of junk and scrap metal. Access into the trailer was through secret passages, the main one being the Cold Gate—a discarded refrigerator embedded in the same pile of junk. This fridge was empty, but there was a mechanism inside it that allowed the back wall to be pushed aside to reveal a short corrugated metal tunnel. This tunnel led to the trailer's main door.

"It's lucky the residents of Seven Pines are taking care of the case themselves," Pete said with relief. "I thought we would have to protect flower beds for the next few days."

"Well, maybe the case would have been quite exciting," Bob said. "Anyway, I tell you what could be a case for us—the woman I saw at the petrol station looked very stressed, like something was really bothering her… Maybe she needs our help."

"We can keep an eye on Skinny, just to be on the safe side…" Jupe said.

"Okay, I have a photo of her taken from a distance, so it is not exactly very clear," Bob said as he sent the image to their colour laser printer. As soon as the page slid out, he handed it to Pete. "Here!"

"Arrgh!" Pete groaned, referring to the purple Beetle. "Nobody should ever do that to a car!"

Bob chuckled. "I knew you'd say that. Tell you what—I'll pin it up right here on our notice board for your viewing pleasure, just in case you get bored."

The photo showed a young woman with tangled hair and a tall man with broad shoulders and a crew cut.

"Who are the people in the photo?" Pete asked.

"Well, they are the ones that Skinny was talking to."

"We will continue…" Jupiter sat down on his office chair behind the desk. "The Three Investigators won't retreat just because a few people think they can take violent vigilante action… That is why we will lie in wait tonight because I would like to prevent the so-called 'fierce confrontation' that might happen based on what we have been told… In any case, some basic information about our supposed opponents wouldn't be bad. Who do we know who lives in the area?"

"Kelly lives on the northern edge of Rocky Beach," said Pete. "That's almost around the corner from Seven Pines."

"Inspector Cotta's house is also very close to Seven Pines, on Hillwood Terrace," Bob added.

"Then we'll ask him first." Jupiter reached for the phone and dialled the number of the Rocky Beach Police Department. He turned on the loudspeaker so his friends could listen in.

It rang twice, then Inspector Cotta picked up. He was The Three Investigators' police contact. Deep down, he appreciated their professional partnership, even if he did not openly admit it. Sometimes it seemed that the three of them got on his nerves. Today was no exception.

“What’s going on now?” he asked when Jupiter had greeted him. “I was just about to take a little break. My coffee is getting cold.”

“It’s about Seven Pines, the neighbourhood north of Rocky Beach.” Jupiter was not put off by the inspector’s brusque manner. “We were with a client today who feels threatened.”

“Seven Pines,” muttered Inspector Cotta. “That’s not my area of operation. Sheriff Brewer is in charge there.”

“We know that, but you live close by,” the First Investigator persisted.

“You never give up, do you?” said the inspector. “Well then, since the neighbourhood was built, the Seven Pines residents have been upset with campers occupying the neighbouring Freeman grounds.”

“Isn’t that the piece of land that stretches between two groves all the way to the sea?” Jupe asked.

“That’s right. The site belonged to Dennis Freeman, a pretty weird guy. He ran a barbecue restaurant there for many years. He passed away four months ago. I think the property went to his brother.”

“Why do the campers live there?” Jupe asked.

“Dennis Freeman has rented out, at a very reasonable price, an area behind the restaurant to a couple of young odd-job workers with construction trailers and camper vans. All of them are bullies that you better not get involved with. This could turn out badly.”

“Why?”

“Those people have a bad reputation in our area. Some of my neighbours are afraid of them and are glad that Seven Pines is between our houses and the Freeman grounds, shielding us in a way.”

“—And these campers are still allowed to live there even though Freeman’s brother now owns the area?” Jupiter continued to probe.

“Supposedly Jack Freeman is still renting it to the gang for now, but the residents of Seven Pines want them out. I don’t know any more than that, though. The old barbecue restaurant used to be a popular hot spot. My colleagues and I often went there on Thursdays, especially for the ribs… and speaking of ribs, I’d like to take my break now because I am hungry.”

“Thank you very much, Inspector,” Jupiter said, and the conversation ended.

“So Jack Freeman has to decide whether to continue renting the place to the campers amidst the wrath of the residents.” Jupiter sat back thoughtfully. “The grounds have access to the sea, and on one side is the border with Seven Pines.”

“Have you been there?” asked Bob.

“No, why?” Jupiter stood up and took a city map from the shelf.

“—Because then you would know that the subsoil is not exactly good,” Bob said. “The ground is uneven and relatively damp—making it difficult for development.”

“Hmm…” Jupiter mused. “Probably that’s why it makes sense for Jack Freeman to continue renting it to people who would just want to use that place as a camping ground… but at the moment it is secondary. What should be of current interest to us is what will happen there tonight.”

“—And whether anything will happen there at all,” Pete added.

“If Mr Fraser is right, it could well be a very restless night.” Jupiter unfolded the map. “So, we’ll meet back at Seven Pines after dinner. This time, though, not in front of Mrs McGowan’s house but on the wooded hill behind it. We’ll watch the area from there.”

“I’m afraid I can’t go. The horror holiday comes first,” said Bob in a contrite tone. “Have you forgotten?”

“I thought you weren’t going to your horrible cousin’s place until tomorrow,” said Pete. “Where is it? Woodstock?”

“Woodfield,” Bob corrected and then sighed. “We’re leaving tonight. Dad thinks he can get around the traffic jam better that way.”

Jupiter frowned. “You’re not flying?”

“No, unfortunately,” Bob replied. “Mum and Dad think we should use the holidays for a really nice family trip. That’s why we’re going the whole miserable way by car—all along the coast, through California, Oregon and half of Washington, up to the Canadian border.”

“Look on the bright side. Every minute you’re in the car you don’t have to spend with your cousin Mary.”

“What good is that to me if after two days of driving I still have to spend a whole four days with her and her parents? … Anyway, what will become of the case?”

“We can do it without you,” said Jupiter, lost in thought as he bent over a map of the area.

“Well, thank you!” Bob wasn’t exactly cheered up. “That’s what I wanted to hear.”

“What?” Jupiter continued to look at the map.

“Oh, nothing.” Bob scowled and crossed his arms. He was not mistaken—everything was against him, even his friends!

“Bob, we need you, really,” said Jupiter appeasingly, “but tonight, this one time, it doesn’t matter if you didn’t come.”

Bob did not answer, so Jupiter continued, “Pete, you get yourself some black clothes. We have to dress inconspicuously. Then you come back here and we’ll cycle to the Freeman grounds. We can hide the bikes in the bushes there.”

“Well, have fun with your case!” growled Bob. “I have to go now.”

“We’ll call you and keep you posted,” Pete promised.

“Not on my mobile phone.” Bob’s expression did not brighten. “It broke when it fell out of my pocket this morning.” He waved to his friends and went to the trailer door. “Well, take care, guys. I think I’ll resign myself to my fate!”

When Bob had gone out, Pete said, “He seemed pretty dejected.”

“He’ll be fine.” Jupiter folded up the map. “Bob doesn’t get down that easily.”

## 4. “No, I’m Not Going!”

“No!”

“What do you mean, no?” Mrs Andrews turned to Bob in disbelief.

“‘No’ as in ‘No, I’m not going!’”

“Of course you’re going to Woodfield.” She smiled as if Bob had made a joke. “Mary is really looking forward to your visit.”

“Mum… Jupe, Pete and I have a case right now; besides, it’s terrible in Woodfield,” Bob declared with an undertone of absolute despair in his voice. “Mary can talk for 24 hours without a break, and she’s interested in figure skating!”

“Robert, that’s enough!” Mrs Andrews paced frantically up and down the kitchen, packing a basket of groceries. As she tried to fit several bars of chocolate between oranges and a packet of muffins, Bob’s father came in.

“We’re going to Woodfield, not the end of the world,” Mr Andrews retorted. “I’m sure there are supermarkets there too.”

“If you get hungry after an hour’s drive, you will thank me. Besides, I promised Judy I’d bring my home-made muffins,” Mrs Andrews said reproachfully.

“Well,” Bob tried again. “I’ve stayed home alone before. Why can’t I do that this time?”

“—Because your aunt and uncle will want to see you,” his mother said, “not to mention Mary. She wants you to meet her boyfriend Dexter.”

“That’s deterrence enough!”

“Robert!”

“Mum!” Bob stood up from the kitchen table. “Please… I’m not doing anything wrong… and I can take care of myself. It’s only a few days.”

“You’re coming with us.” Mrs Andrews put a towel on the bulging basket. “We’re ready to go.”

Bob turned to his father. “Dad! If you want, I’ll stay with the Crenshaws or with the Joneses at the salvage yard.”

Mr Andrews hesitated briefly, then caught his wife’s stern look. He cleared his throat. “You heard your mother. Besides, you just came back from that rock concert in San Francisco.”

“I’m sure other parents wouldn’t have allowed their children to do that,” added Bob’s mother.

“Mum, I wasn’t there for fun; it was a job,” explained Bob. He was working as a part-time employee for the music agency Rock-Plus. Just two days before, he had accompanied a new band to a gig on behalf of his boss, Sax Sendler.

“It doesn’t matter.” Mrs Andrews went into the hallway. Bob followed her.

“I’m not going!” Bob sat down on the bottom step of the stairs. “I’m staying here!”

“Well, come on now,” said Mr Andrews appeasingly.

Bob did not react. Instead, he watched his mother. He wanted to see what was happening. So far, he had always been able to reach a compromise with his parents. Mrs Andrews vigorously put on her blazer.

“I’m not going to Woodfield!” Bob reiterated. “I’m staying here!” He himself thought his own words sounded foreign, but he was annoyed with his mother and there was no way he was going to Woodfield. There was no question of backing down now.

“Bob! That’s enough!” Mr Andrews said, now quite a bit more sternly.

Mrs Andrews looked at her husband gratefully. She opened the front door. “We have to hurry or we’ll never get there.”

“Have a good trip!” Bob waved demonstratively at his mother. He forced himself to smile confidently.

His parents looked at each other. “You decide,” Mrs Andrews finally said to her husband. A steep frown line formed on her forehead.

“I can’t very well carry him out of here.” Mr Andrews took the car keys from the bowl on the hall table.

“I’m sure Henry would never let something like that pass with Pete. He—”

“—Is not up for debate here now,” Mr Andrews interjected. “We have to get going if we want to make it to Morro Bay today.”

“Fine, let’s go now.” Mrs Andrews also reached into the bowl and took the key for Bob’s Beetle. “Your car stays in the garage, Robert, and when we come back, you’ll be grounded for a fortnight, and your pocket money will be cut. Also, the drinks in the living room cupboard are off limits… and don’t you dare have a party here!” Her voice was shrill. Without turning to face him again, she rushed out of the house.

Mr Andrews, on the other hand, hesitated. He remained calm, but Bob could tell that his father was disappointed. This was clearly worse than his mother’s anger.

“Last chance, Bob,” his father said.

Bob was about to give in, but then the words passed his lips before he had really thought about it. “I’m staying here.”

Mr Andrews said nothing in reply. He just nodded. Then he stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Bob took a deep breath. He had six whole days and nights alone at home! Only he couldn’t really be happy about it.

Slowly he went up the stairs to his room. It was already around half past six. Bob reached for the phone and dialled the number of Headquarters. It rang, and then the answering machine took over. Bob hung up without leaving a message. Jupe and Pete had apparently already gone to Seven Pines. He refrained from calling his friends on their mobile phones—in case they were tailing someone.

Bob had to hurry if he didn’t want to miss anything. Jupiter had said they would be on the lookout. That called for inconspicuous clothes, preferably black.

Bob opened his wardrobe. Neatly arranged, there were piles of jumpers, shirts, T-shirts and trousers, but there was nothing black. Bob snorted and ran back down the stairs to the laundry room. In front of the washing machine was a rack of damp T-shirts and trousers. Annoyed, Bob realized that his mother had obviously done black laundry today.

“Thanks, Mum!” he hissed. “Am I supposed to go all white now, or what?” Then he remembered that he hadn’t yet thrown the clothes from the rock concert into the laundry basket. They were in the small travel bag he had taken with him to San Francisco.

Bob ran up the stairs to his room. He never thought these clothes would come in handy after all. He pulled the T-shirt out of his bag. It was midnight black and advertised the band ‘Death Planet’ in dark red letters. It was accompanied by black leather trousers. Bob didn’t

like the clothes much, but they were black and sturdy—just the thing for a night-tailing operation with an uncertain outcome.

He slipped into the T-shirt and trousers. Grinning, he looked in the mirror. There stood an almost stranger. What a difference clothes could make! Bob brushed his blond hair out of his forehead, which shone at him from the mirror. It didn't work like that. He could still be seen from a distance. He needed some dark headgear. Bob decided on a ski cap. Yes, he was well camouflaged that way. Jupiter and Pete would laugh when they saw him.

Bob took one last look in the mirror, then hurried out of his room.

Since he had no car keys, he had to take his bicycle. Anyway, a little exercise was just what he needed. He swung himself into the saddle and cycled off. The air was warm.

Bob smiled. The tension of the afternoon fell away from him and he felt free all at once. He didn't have to go to Woodfield! No holiday with Mary and her boyfriend! No endless dinners of stone-hard mashed potatoes and incessant chatter! So he had escaped the greatest horror. Maybe this week wasn't so bad after all.

However, Bob had no idea how wrong he was about this!

## 5. Night Surveillance

"We don't really have to go through that, do we?" asked Pete. He looked sceptically at the grove in front of him.

"I'm afraid we do. Beyond that is Seven Pines." Jupiter sighed. "I admit that after studying the map, I had imagined the grove to be a lot more accessible."

"Throw away the map. You go first." The Second Investigator looked at his friend expectantly.

"If I remember correctly, as Second Investigator, you are the one for field operations. If not for your unerring sense of direction, I would probably go astray after just four steps."

"Thank you for the compliment and the admission, but my sense of direction does not protect me from thorns, so you go ahead this time."

"All right." Jupiter grabbed a branch, pushed it aside and cautiously struggled forward. It was arduous work. As Jupiter painfully discovered, there were not only wildly rampant thorny vines in the grove, but also huge clumps of nettles.

When he finally saw the street lights of Seven Pines shimmering through the trees, he stopped in relief. "We're almost there," he whispered.

"Now what?" Pete stepped close behind him.

"We are on a slight hill," Jupe announced. "If we walk a few more metres, we have a clear view of the restaurant without being seen ourselves."

After a few steps, the Second Investigator stopped again. "Down there is Hortensia Drive."

Visible satisfaction was evident on Jupiter's round face. "Wonderful! Then I've led us to the right place."

"Not quite," replied Pete. "We should have headed north-west. Then we would have come out at the top of the hill above the restaurant, but we are now in the south-west."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"—Because I wanted to see if you could do it without me." Pete grinned. "—And the result speaks for itself—outdoors you're lost without me."

"So we have to go back and cross this grove again?" asked Jupe, aghast.

"I'm afraid so."

"You can't do that to me. I—" Jupiter broke off in the middle in the sentence.

"What is it?"

"I think I saw a shadow. Down there by the magnolia tree—on the other side of the road." The First Investigator narrowed his eyes. "Yes, there's someone back there. See… there… next to the garage."

"Oh, that'll be Mr Fraser… or someone from his vigilante group." Pete stood indecisively in front of his friend. "So, shall we make our way to the other side now?"

Jupiter did not answer. He stared down at the gardens.

Pete folded his arms. "So if nothing happens here, I've cancelled a movie with Kelly for nothing."

"This is so much more exciting," said the First Investigator, without taking his eyes off Hortensia Drive. "You are out in the fresh air and in the best company."

“Yes, of course, and the highlight of the evening is some kind of false alarm. Perhaps a random cat ventures near the restaurant without asking permission. The residents freak out and pandemonium breaks loose. I hope the cat will at least hurry up… then I still have time to go see Kelly today after all.”

The alarm was not long in coming. However, it was not a cat that set it off. An angry call resounded through the darkness from afar. There was a clatter.

“Come on, come on!” shouted Pete.

“Wait!” Jupiter grabbed his friend by the sleeve. He pointed down to the street. “There!”

Pete now understood why Jupiter had restrained him. Directly below, several figures were creeping through the gardens.

“I suspect the campers anticipate the vigilantes will be at the restaurant,” Jupiter whispered, “so they’re targeting other areas—such as the houses and gardens.”

“Could some campers also show up at the restaurant?” Pete enquired. “Shouldn’t we consider splitting up?”

“No,” Jupiter responded. “If the campers appear at the restaurant, it is likely a diversion. The vigilantes can manage that on their own. We should both focus on monitoring the houses.”

They descended the hill under the cover of low-hanging trees, as shadows spread across the gardens before them.

“Quick!” gasped Jupe, although he had already been overtaken by the athletic Second Investigator. “We’ll get them!”

Pete could no longer hear what Jupe said. Without looking back, he ran to the place where he had just seen one of the shadows. Sure enough, something was moving there in the darkness—very close to a house.

Pete picked up his pace. Then he saw it—a crouching figure in black clothes climbed two steps to the back door of the house. Pete grinned. He would catch the intruder in the act.

The Second Investigator did not hesitate. As the most athletic of The Three Investigators, he jogged regularly and was in very good shape.

Pete set off over a garden fence, jumped over a flower bed and sprinted across the thick carpet of grass straight towards the intruder. The intruder flinched when he noticed Pete approaching. He let go of the door as if he had received an electric shock and stumbled around the corner of the house.

Pete sprinted in pursuit. The intruder veered sharply, forcing Pete to pivot with urgency. He narrowly avoided a menacing cactus and surged forward with renewed determination. The shadowy figure in black crashed through a dense hedge. Suddenly, the air was pierced by furious shouts echoing from the darkness… followed by a gunshot! Without turning around or slowing down, he went after the intruder.

“Just you wait!” Pete growled. He would get the intruder, he was sure. The man couldn’t run from garden to garden forever. At some point, he would get tired.

A swimming pool appeared in front of the intruder, cutting him off. He slowed down. Pete was triumphant. Now he would catch him! He threw himself forward. With both hands, he pushed the intruder to the ground.

“Hey, watch it!” The Second Investigator was surprised to hear a female voice.

When the intruder turned around, Pete could make out her face. It was a powerfully built woman of about twenty. Tangled strands of red hair spilled out from under her black cap. She glared angrily at him from narrow green eyes.

Involuntarily, Pete loosened his grip, but he should rather not have done that. She jerked one arm up and hit him on the chin with her fist. He drew in a sharp breath.

“Let go of me!” The young woman jumped up, but immediately, Pete grabbed hold of one of her trouser legs and brought her down again. Pete noticed that she was wearing bright-yellow socks.

“You brute!” she shouted.

“Stop struggling and I’ll let you go!”

Instead of giving up, she gave him a push. Pete, however, was not so easily thrown off balance.

“I’m sorry!” he gasped. “I don’t usually fight women, but for one who destroys gardens and breaks into houses, I make an exception.” He pushed her to the ground again.

“So what now?” she hissed. “Are you going to report me to the sheriff?”

“That’s a good idea.”

“You got it all wrong!” She kicked at his shin. “Stop it or I’ll have to hurt you!”

“Oh yeah?” Pete barked. “Who gives you the right to do that?”

She tried to tear herself away. As she did so, she continued to kick at him. Pete was not deterred. He tightened his grip. She was an intruder. She didn’t deserve any better, did she? The woman snapped at him like an angry animal.

Pete fought her off with his right hand while he squeezed her arms together with his left. Lights came on upstairs in the house. Hopefully people would call the police. Then he only had to hold the woman long enough, but that was exactly what he could not do.

In desperation, the woman sank her teeth into the back of Pete’s hand. The Second Investigator cried out. Together they toppled backwards towards the swimming pool. Pete saw the dark expanse of water rushing towards him. There was a splash, then he found himself underwater.

The young woman tore herself away and quickly crawled through the water to the side of the pool. There she clambered out of the water.

Pete spat chlorinated water and got out of the water. Then he scrambled after her. Too late! The woman had already reached the garden gate. The Second Investigator set off again at a sprint. This time she was not allowed to escape.

Two other dark shadows ran around a bend in the road. The woman ran after them, leaving a wet trail on the road. Lights had gone on in many houses by now. Pete paid no attention. He accelerated. He would catch up with her in a moment.

Just then, he bumped full force into something tall and dark that came running out of a garden. He crashed to the ground.

“Pete!”

The Second Investigator looked up. “Jupe?”

“What—”

“No time!” Pete scrambled to his feet, but the woman had already disappeared around the corner. The two boys heard another gunshot, then the sound of an engine that quickly moved away.

“They’re escaping!” Pete ran his hand through his wet hair in annoyance.

“We have to go after them!” Jupiter shouted. “Maybe someone’s been hurt.”

“No!” Pete held his friend back. “That was no gunshot, but a backfire.”

“What?”

“A backfire. This happens when the engine is not properly adjusted and—”

“So it was a car?” the First Investigator interrupted Pete, who nodded.

“If it wasn’t a gunshot, we’d better get out of the way now.” Jupiter started to move. “I don’t want to have to explain to people what we were doing here. Officially, it’s not our case anymore.”

“Too bad!” Pete looked down at his dripping clothes. “This really isn’t my lucky week.”

“That was what Bob said this week.” Jupiter set about climbing back up the slope. Loose soil crumbled under his shoes and made progress difficult. The rotund First Investigator puffed audibly.

“It’s easy for Bob to say,” Pete said as he dodged a low-hanging branch. “He’s now sitting comfortably in the car heading north.”

Bob’s bike whizzed down the slight incline to Seven Pines. If he hurried, he could reach his colleagues at the agreed observation post before anything exciting happened. He looked forward to seeing their stunned faces.

He had just rolled around a bend in good spirits when he heard shouting. Then a gunshot followed. He was too late after all!

Bob pedalled hard. Instead of parking his bike at the bushes, he decided to stay on the road that led straight down into the camping ground.

Noise rang out again. He shifted into a higher gear. An owl crossed his path in low flight. Bob ducked down, startled. The big bird diverted his attention from the road, so he did not see the car until it was too late.

The car had not switched on its headlights despite the darkness, and it was racing up the winding road at tremendous speed—straight at Bob!

Someone screamed out. Brakes squealed and the car skidded to the side. Bob only managed to yank his bike around before the car caught him.

A bright light flashed. Bob felt like he was flying while the world around him shattered into millions of shards. He tried to catch his breath, but moments later, he fell into bottomless darkness.

## 6. The Freeman Grounds

"Let's summarize…" Jupiter Jones looked up from his cocoa.

The First and Second Investigators were sitting with Pete's girlfriend, Kelly Madigan, in her kitchen. Despite the late hour, she had to attend to Pete after he had told her that it was an emergency.

"Point one—a group of as yet unidentified people are indeed targeting the residents of Seven Pines," Jupiter said. "Point two—instead of wreaking havoc on the community gathering as expected, the attackers turned their attention to the residents' properties… Point three—they not only destroy lawns and flower beds but also attempt to break into houses."

Pete nodded. "Then there is probably a connection between the burglary of the garage and the uprooted flowers… so these people are ruthless."

"That's what it looks like."

"—And I could identify at least one of them," said Pete. "She has red hair and bites like a sabre-toothed tiger. Ow!" He gave a cry of pain as Kelly dripped some medication on his wound.

"Hold still!" Kelly retorted. "—And stop yelling."

"Do you have to do that? This is pure torture."

"The wound needs to be cleaned. Besides, you don't deserve any better."

"I didn't do anything," Pete defended himself.

"You didn't? First you stand me up on Tuesday to go surfing with Jeffrey. Then you don't have time for a movie tonight… and finally you come here with Jupe in the middle of the night, soaking wet, and got me out of bed."

"I'm badly hurt," complained the Second Investigator. "Coming here was my last resort."

"Typical! If you ever get a scratch, you immediately think you're going to die." Kelly cut a plaster to size. "You're lucky that my parents are used to such nonsense by now."

While Kelly treated Pete's wound, Jupiter looked out the window into the night.

"There were at least seven people… and they had one or two cars. I didn't see them, but I heard one of them."

"Yes, I think it is an old and badly maintained car," Pete said. "The engine sounded kind of malfunctioned, and then there was this backfire."

"For a moment I thought someone was really shooting," Jupiter said seriously.

"Me too," Pete admitted. "The way they were going, I wouldn't have put it past them."

"The situation in Seven Pines is getting worse and worse," Kelly agreed with a frown. "If something isn't done about it soon, someone is really going to get seriously hurt."

"Not if we do something," said Jupiter firmly. "First thing tomorrow we're going out to the Freeman grounds to look for a red-haired woman and an old purple Beetle."

"Be careful!" Kelly warned. "If it really was those campers back there, they're not to be trifled with. After all, you really ruined their break-in at Seven Pines today."

"Have you ever met one of them?" asked Pete.

"Me? No," retorted Kelly. "What makes you think of that? I don't usually hang around that area and the barbecue restaurant has been closed for a couple of years."

"I was just thinking…"

“It’s okay.” Kelly put the unused plasters back in the pack. “I never had anything to do with the people from the Freeman grounds itself, but there was once a girl in my jazz dance class who had friends there.”

“Really?” Jupe listened up.

“Yes, but that was a long time ago. We are not in contact anymore. Bee was two or three years older than me and we were never really friends. I can’t even think of her full name right now.” Kelly seemed to be thinking hard. “One day she had to give up dancing because her mother wanted her to stop and focus on school. By then Bee was hanging out with the campers, mostly to annoy her father… and…” She paused. “—But that doesn’t matter for your case, does it?”

“If there is no more contact, yes,” Jupiter said, “otherwise, this Bee might have been a good source of information.”

“I don’t even have her phone number anymore.”

“Too bad.” Jupiter poured himself some more cocoa. “—But a connection between the incidents at Seven Pines and the campers hasn’t been proven yet.”

“Please, no more of this tonight.” Pete yawned.

“My sentiments exactly. I hereby declare this meeting over.” Kelly put the pot of leftover cocoa away. “I’d like to go back to bed now.” Then she emphatically pushed her friend out the door. “Have a pleasant night!”

When Pete came into Headquarters the next morning, Jupiter was just piling the remaining raisin buns onto a plate. “Well, still badly hurt?”

“It’s okay. I think I will continue to live, at least for the time being.”

“Good… then The Three Investigators can get down to business… or should I say ‘The Two Investigators’ since Bob has other things to worry about at the moment.”

Pete looked glumly at the stack of buns. “We should wait until he’s back.”

“I see no reason for that. We can’t wait until the situation in Seven Pines gets worse and worse. We’ll investigate today to see if the intruder is one of the campers. Then we’ll know who we’re dealing with.” Jupiter turned to the photo Bob had pinned on their notice board. “You said she had tangled red hair?”

“Yes. Curly hair and green eyes… or blue. I can’t be sure in the dim light.”

“Did she look like the woman here?” Jupiter pointed at Bob’s photo.

“Something like this.” Pete wasn’t sure. “She had other clothes on, including bright-yellow socks.”

“So there is a possibility that the red-haired woman is not only connected to the campers, but also to Skinny.”

“That just makes me dislike the campers all the more,” Pete said. “How do we actually want to proceed? We can’t just go up to those campers and ask them about last night. If they’re even half as aggressive as I fear, it’ll go badly with us.”

“I don’t intend to do that. Instead, we will therefore act as package deliverers.”

“It won’t do us any good if Miss Sabre-Toothed Tiger is actually there. She might recognize me after all… and you might have been seen by the other scoundrels too.”

“Disguise is part of the repertoire for good investigators.” Jupiter put his fingertips together. “I didn’t opt for the package delivery thing for nothing. Only recently, the boss of Rocky Beach Delivery bought a rare collector’s item from Uncle Titus for his antique cutlery collection—the soup spoon of some Hollywood star. He was overjoyed and then said that he would return a favour one day.”

“—And you took that literally? I’m sure the man just said that.”

“So what? A promise is a promise. I called him first thing this morning. He is willing to let us have one of his vans and two uniforms for an hour. That’s enough; we won’t need any longer than that.”

“—And what do we deliver?” asked Pete.

“A parcel for Dennis Freeman.” Jupe pointed to an open package on the table. Inside was a book entitled *The Fifty Best Barbecue Recipes for Beginners*. “Better safe than sorry in case they rip open the package.”

Pete looked down at the box. “—And who on earth is Ronald B. Donner from Bakersfield?”

“There is no such person. The return address is, of course, made up. I couldn’t very well write ‘The Three Investigators’ and the address of the salvage yard on it.”

He handed Pete a wig. “Try this one on. We can pick up the van at eleven. Until then, we still have to make ourselves unrecognizable… and do it properly.”

## 7. The Boy With Amnesia

Something wet dripped down onto his face. That was the first thing he noticed. The second thing was the pain. Everything hurt. Slowly he opened his eyes. The world was blurred. Somewhere above him was a face. He blinked. It was a girl with shoulder-length black hair and a snub nose.

"Welcome back to the world of the conscious," she said. Then she pressed a wet towel to his forehead.

"What happened?" he murmured.

"You had an accident." The girl continued dabbing. It hurt badly. "Blaine, Roxy and Josh hit you by accident. They said you suddenly came at them on your bike—right out of nowhere. Probably one of those idiots from Seven Pines was chasing you."

"Idiots from Seven Pines?" He did not know what she was talking about. Straining, he tried to remember what had happened, but there was nothing—no today, no yesterday, nothing! Horrified, he realized that it wasn't just the last few hours that he couldn't remember. He tried to get up.

"Careful!" the girl admonished.

"I…" He tried to fight the panic rising inside him. "I don't know who I am."

"What?" The black-haired girl looked at him in disbelief. She lowered the towel.

"My name…" He bit his lip. It was possible to forget many things, but not one's own name.

"Your name? What about it?" the girl asked.

"I don't remember… I don't remember my name." He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. Names rushed through his head—Adam, John, Jack, Bill, Nathan, David… no, they were all wrong.

"Supposedly this kind of thing can happen if you get hit on the head," the girl said. "I think it's called amnesia."

"Yes, I've heard of that before," said the boy with amnesia. "I just don't know when or where I heard of it. It's all so crazy."

"In the movies I've seen, the memory comes back after a while." She looked at him encouragingly. "—For example, after a blow to the head, a shock or something else."

"'Something else' would be my preference, to be honest." He smiled wryly.

"I can understand."

He looked at her questioningly. "Uh… you really don't know me? Not even by sight? Perhaps we have met before…" He eyed the girl, hoping to come across hidden memories.

She was maybe eighteen or nineteen years old, definitely not older. The girl looked nice, and she had a nice smile. He liked her, and yet she did not seem the least bit familiar to him. Her straight black hair, the snake tattoo on her right forearm, the large earrings—none of it was familiar.

She shook her head regretfully. "No, we never met until now," she confirmed, validating his assumption. "I'm guessing you're a friend of Paul's or one of the other guys. When they are back, we can clear things up."

"Why didn't you take me to the hospital?" asked the boy.

“My brother Josh said you might not want it. We didn’t know if you have health insurance… and also, we got into trouble once when we took another friend of Paul’s to the hospital. He was kind of on the run from the police, and then they arrested him right there.”

“I don’t think I’m on the run,” the boy said.

“For safety’s sake, we brought you here to my trailer first. Then we got Perkins to come over. He’s an acquaintance of Paul’s and owed us something. I think he was a paramedic or something for a while, but you’d better not ask him. Anyway, he tended to your wounds earlier, and if you get worse we can bring him back.”

“No, I’m fine. I think I’ll be fine.” The boy looked down at himself. He was wearing sturdy lace-up boots, dusty black leather trousers and a no less dusty T-shirt with some writing on it. None of it looked familiar to him.

“Did I have a bag or a backpack with me?” he asked.

“No, we didn’t find anything. There was only your bike… and it’s totally damaged.”

“There must be some clue as to who I am,” he said incredulously. “—Some ID, a driving licence, a mobile phone…” He patted down his clothes. It was uncomfortable because his right palm was scraped. He gritted his teeth. In any case, he didn’t find money or a wallet on him.

“Before I forget, I’m Mina… Mina Parker.”

“Mina Parker?” the boy repeated. “Sounds like the young woman in the *Dracula* novel.”

“Exactly! Well, almost. Her last name was Harker. My mother liked to read scary novels. I guess she thought it would be funny to name me after a character in a book.” She laughed but then she became serious again. “Unfortunately, I can’t ask her about it. She died sixteen years ago. All I have left is my brother Josh.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Sometimes I would have liked the chance to get to know my mum better but hey, you’re probably doing worse than me at this point. You don’t even know who your parents are.”

“If I have any at all!” he said. His gaze slid over the messy interior of the large caravan. “Funny how I remember *Dracula* but not my own mother or father.”

“I hope it all comes back to you soon.” Mina stood up and opened a narrow door. “You can freshen up a bit here. I have a shower in the bathroom, but the hot water never lasts long. You have to be quick if you don’t want to freeze.” She glanced inside. “Take the green towel. It’s still relatively clean.”

“Thanks.” The boy stepped into the small bathroom. It smelled musty and was very small. Next to a poster of a sombrely dressed rock band hung a cabinet with mirrored doors. One of the mirrors was cracked. The other was dirty.

The boy looked in and immediately flinched. There stood a complete stranger. He blinked. He had not expected that. Somehow he had hoped to recognize himself but he was disappointed. Nevertheless, he wiped away the roughest dirt and dared a second look in the mirror. There stood a blond teenager with a narrow, tanned face and blue eyes. The age was hard to estimate. At first glance he looked sixteen or seventeen… but he might as well be older… or younger? Fifteen? What did one look like at fifteen anyway?

He turned his face back and forth. No, he was more like seventeen. Maybe even eighteen… and he was reasonably good-looking—at least, if one disregarded the bruises he had sustained in the accident.

An ugly bloody scratch ran across the right side of his face. His short, straight hair was caked with blood at the base, and above his eyebrow he had a bump that was already turning dark.

“Oh my goodness!” he whispered. “I’ve got it bad.” He took off his clothes. He didn’t like the T-shirt with ‘Death Planet’ printed on it. Besides, he felt as if he had never worn it before… but that must have been due to his amnesia.

When he stepped into the shower, he winced. This time because the water burned his wounds. He therefore preferred to use the shower gel sparingly. As Mina had said, the water became cold after a short time. He saw the goose bumps on his slender arms. He noted with slight regret that he was not exactly muscular—a great athlete he certainly was not.

“This is not my lucky day!” he sighed, turned off the shower, and reached for the green towel.

When the blond boy stepped out of the bathroom, he saw Mina with a visitor, a slim young man. The two were seated at the small living area table, with the visitor’s back facing the boy.

“I hate to repeat myself, but this time I’m serious,” Mina said. “We have to go to the police. Anything else would be too dangerous.” She looked up as the boy joined them. “Oh yeah! Here’s the boy I was telling you about—the one who has amnesia.”

The visitor turned around and was startled. “Hey! You’re—” He fell silent abruptly…

The blond boy also paused in his movement.

The visitor smiled kindly. “Mina has just told me that she has taken in someone who has lost his memory… but to think it’s you!”

“You know him?” asked Mina hopefully.

“Of course! … This is my buddy Stan Silver.”

“Stan Silver?” The name meant nothing to the boy. Somehow the visitor actually looked familiar to him, but he could not remember any details. Hesitantly, he shook his head. That hurt.

“That’s right,” the visitor confirmed. “We’ve known each other for years. I called you and asked if you could help us to confront those fuddy-duddies of Seven Pines… but you probably don’t remember that either.”

“I don’t remember anything,” Stan said dejectedly. “To be honest, I feel quite strange myself.”

“Well, you took quite a hit, didn’t you?” the visitor said sympathetically.

“Maybe you can help Stan get his memory back,” Mina suggested.

“Sure! He’s welcome to stay over at my place. There’s not enough room here with you and your brother anyway. So Stan, why don’t you come with me and I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

“That sounds good,” Stan said and smiled. Finally, there was someone who could help him regain his memory.

“You two go ahead,” Mina said. “I have to prepare the list of groceries we need. Let’s see what excuses Paul and Steve have today. Oh, well. See you then, Stan.”

“Uh… yeah,” Stan said, “and thanks for your help.”

“Come on…” The visitor stood up. “The weather is great outside.”

“Uh… this is embarrassing, but I can’t remember your name…”

“Oh yeah! I forgot about that… anyway, my name is Skinny… Skinny Norris.”

## 8. ‘The Three Instigators’

The boy who was called Stan stepped out of the trailer behind Skinny.

Sure enough, it was warm outside. It must be summer, Stan thought. They walked between a couple of caravans. There was a smell of wood fire.

“I live right over there in the blue construction trailer,” explained Skinny. “It’s not really furnished yet because I only moved here recently, and I don’t have a bathroom either, but I have plenty of space.” He stopped in front of his trailer. “I used to live in an apartment, but this is better, believe me.”

“Looks cosy!”

“It’s your new home now—at least for the time being. After all, you seldom stay in one place for long.” He pointed to two plastic chairs and a rickety table in front of the trailer. “Why don’t you sit down?”

“Thank you.” Stan lowered himself onto one of the chairs.

“Do you want something to drink?”

“Do you have water?”

“Water?” asked Skinny incredulously. “Stan, you must really have amnesia. In the old days, you would have asked for a beer.”

“Really?” Stan thought about it. He wasn’t thirsty for beer. On the contrary, he was almost sure he didn’t like it at all. So that was how much he had changed.

“Well, what do you want?” Skinny asked again.

“Water?”

“We’re out. Will a Coke do?”

Stan nodded, and Skinny disappeared into his trailer. “Where did you leave your stuff, Stan?” asked Skinny from inside the trailer.

“I don’t know. I didn’t even have a wallet or a backpack on me when your people brought me here.” He reached into his trouser pockets, hoping to find something that could jog his memory. Out came a crumpled flyer from a rock concert, then a stamped drink voucher, followed by a piece of green chalk. “It’s no use…” he mumbled to himself. “I don’t remember any of these, especially this strange green chalk.”

As Stan reached into his back pocket, he found another piece of paper. It was a business card with large fonts. The card said:

Strangely, he had the feeling that he had seen this card before. “Somehow the names look familiar,” he thought to himself as he continued to stare at the card.

“Look what I just found!” Stan held the card out to Skinny as he stepped out of the trailer with two bottles of Coke and a packet of sandwiches. Stan then read the text out loud.

“Where did you get that card?” Skinny asked.

“I found it in my back pocket,” Stan replied. “I wonder if I have something to do with them.”

“You bet!” said Skinny angrily. “These are the guys you owe your amnesia to.”

“You mean these three investigators hit me last night?” Stan groped thoughtfully at the bump on his head.

“No, unfortunately, they were our people, but it was the fault of those rascals. I bet they were chasing you. You raced onto the road, and then Josh’s Jeep hit you head-on.”

“—And who are The Three Investigators?”

“They work for those people from Seven Pines. They take dirty jobs calling themselves investigators.” He made a throwing-away motion. “We’ve had run-ins with them before. Believe me, it’s been a nerve-wracking affair every time. In fact, they should call themselves ‘The Three Instigators’ because that’s what they are good at—instigating trouble.”

Skinny looked at the card. “Jones is the leader. This fat fool thinks he’s incredibly clever. Anyway, you can spot him from afar because he looks like a walking blimp. On the other hand, this Crenshaw is a real coward. He’s got more muscle than brains—a dangerous mix if you ask me.”

“What about Bob Andrews?”

“He seems to be a dull person, but to be honest, I don’t know much about him. I think all he does is to tag along with the other two like a good little puppy dog.” Skinny took a sip of his Coke. “When I saw them in Seven Pines last night, I knew what they were up to—they were hired by the fuddy-duddies to make our lives miserable.

“One of them chased Roxy and threw her into a swimming pool. It’s a miracle she got away,” said Skinny indignantly. “From the way she described him to me, I’m guessing it was that Crenshaw. He is particularly brutal and enjoys fighting.” He opened the second Coke and put it on the camping table in front of Stan.

“—And why did the people from Seven Pines hire these three investigators?” Stan asked.

Skinny scratched his head. “You know, there are constant confrontations here. Those fuddy-duddies with their neat gardens, big houses and showy cars just don’t like us. They accuse us of all sorts of things, like damaging their flower beds, and breaking into their houses… and all because we don’t fit into their way of seeing things.”

“So that’s the reason they attack you?”

“No, they want more than that. They want to get us out of here and turn this place into a deadly boring park with a showpiece playground and all that jazz… but the new owner won’t hear of it.”

“Sounds like trouble,” Stan remarked.

“That’s not all!” Skinny handed him a sandwich. “The night before last they sneaked into our camp, cut the power lines and stole our ‘Free Spirit’.”

“Your what?”

Skinny laughed. “The ‘Free Spirit’ is our mascot. Actually, it’s just a wooden figurine that our buddy Paul made. It’s not valuable, but it means a lot to us. We definitely want it back. Yesterday at noon, we received an anonymous letter. It said that this was just the beginning. They would continue until we leave the camping ground.”

“Did you report this to the police?”

“We can’t trust them,” said Skinny with a heavy sigh. “They think we’re thieves and scoundrels.”

“Then I guess you cannot recover your mascot then.”

“We don’t give up that easily. Yesterday we went to Seven Pines looking for a suitable item with which to get those fuddy-duddies to make an exchange. Our ‘Free Spirit’ for one thing of theirs—an expensive lawnmower, or whatever else they care about.”

“Did you succeed?”

“No. Those three investigators got in the way, but whatever happens, we won’t make it easy for the fuddy-duddies… and those three wannabe investigators will have to face us.”

“‘We Investigate Anything’,” Stan looked down at the card and laughed bitterly. “—And what’s with the question marks?”

“The three question marks? No idea… Perhaps… perhaps they are putting question marks on themselves… because they doubt their own abilities. In fact, we don’t really know what they do, and they don’t either. Be careful if you run into them, though—they’re unpredictable.”

“Do you have enough people?”

“Paul’s got a couple of guys together from San Diego, and Josh called two buddies from LA.”

“—And you called me.”

“Yeah, you still owe me a favour. Remember that time I took you in when your mother kicked you out of the house?”

“I got kicked out?” asked Stan, horrified.

“Be glad that you didn’t suffer a lot.” Skinny leaned forward.

“—And my father?”

“He left for some place.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Nobody knows. Your mother isn’t quite sure anyway…”

“Stop!” Stan raised a hand. “I think I’d like to first hear something nice about my life. I mean, there’s got to be something nice, right?”

“Like what?”

“Friends?”

“Sure you have some—me, for example. To be honest, I called you because you’re one of my best friends, Stan. You may not remember anything, but the two of us have been through a lot together… and I was hoping I could count on you this time too.”

“Well, here I am.”

“Thank you very much.”

“No, I have to thank you,” Stan said. He patted Skinny on the shoulder. “I mean, thanks for letting me stay with you, for taking care of me and explaining all these things I don’t remember. If it wasn’t for you, I think I’d be pretty much lost here.”

“You’re welcome.” Skinny grinned at Stan. “We drop-outs have to stick together, don’t we?”

“We have to, but—” That was as far as Stan got, as a young woman with tangled red curls approached them. Skinny waved at her. Then he turned to Stan. “That’s Roxy. She was in the car that hit you last night.”

The redhead raised her hands placatingly. “Hey, I wasn’t driving, and you just came out of nowhere. Man! You really gave us a scare.” She brushed her hair out of her forehead. “—But sorry anyway. Of course, it wasn’t supposed to turn out like this. Yesterday was a

complete disaster anyway." She pushed up the left sleeve of her colourful top. "See! All covered in bruises. I got them from that thug."

"Crenshaw!" said Skinny in disgust.

She let go of her sleeve. "They will regret messing with us."

"My sentiments exactly."

"Mine too," said Stan. He tore up the card of The Three Investigators and threw the scraps onto the charred remains of the campfire.

"—And what did you come by my humble trailer for?" Skinny changed the subject. "Did you want to meet Stan?"

"Honestly, it's about the shopping. Is it okay if you go shopping with Mina? Paul has to take our car to a mechanic buddy, and I'll meet him there later."

"You got it. We'll just take Josh's Jeep."

"Thank you. Can you go to the pet shop and get some food for Mr Bill?" asked Roxy. "Our supplies are running low."

"Mr Bill is Paul's iguana," Skinny told Stan.

"Unfortunately." Roxy rolled her eyes. "That beast is his everything. Sometimes I think he loves him more than me."

"I wouldn't put it past Paul." Skinny grinned.

"You laugh!" Roxy turned to go. "See you later."

When they were alone again, Stan looked thoughtfully at Skinny. Yes, he did look familiar, except he couldn't remember a single day with him.

"So we're the best of friends, and have been for years. Then you can also tell me what kind of person I am because I happen not to know that right now."

Skinny glanced at his watch. "I'd be happy to do that, but only if you accompany me and Mina to the shops right away. It's a chore, but at least you get out for a change… and surely you want to see the world you live in."

## 9. The Long Arm of the Law

The Rocky Beach Delivery van bumped along the dirt road leading to the vacant barbecue restaurant.

"Watch out you don't get stuck in a mud puddle," Pete admonished the First Investigator who was at the steering wheel. "This road doesn't really deserve a name."

They drove along the upper edge of the Freeman grounds, which was framed on two sides by groves.

"Over there's the old restaurant. Pretty run-down, huh?" Pete pointed to a wooden house that was little more than a ruin. "Honestly, it just needs to be torn down."

"The caravans are probably at the back of the restaurant," Jupiter said. "I'm guessing they have electricity and water there."

"—And fire," said Pete. "They'd better watch out or they'll end up causing a forest fire. Within seconds, the bushes can catch fire like tinder. We've seen that happen often enough."

"They won't burn down their own camp," said Jupiter, sounding unconvinced.

Seven caravans and three cars were parked behind the building. The First Investigator slowed down. "You know what you're about to do, Pete? Do you think you have the acting talent?"

"Yeah, right! If they send us away, I'll intervene. They won't get rid of us until we've checked everything."

"Then what are you so nervous about?"

"I look terrible!" Pete cast an unhappy glance in the rear-view mirror.

Earlier at Headquarters, Jupiter had helped Pete put on a disguise. He had glued on the Second Investigator a chin beard and sideburns. That alone was a reason not to show himself in public anymore. Just as bad were the square black glasses. Pete thought he looked like a freak.

"Success also always demands sacrifices." Jupiter brushed a long strand of synthetic hair out of his forehead. "Besides, it also has a good side—for this one hour, people will think you're at least twenty years old."

"Gee, thanks. That really builds me up," Pete growled with undisguised irony in his voice. "I could grow a beard like this any time I wanted to."

"Who'd believe it?" Jupiter jumped out of the van.

Pete followed him and looked around. Seven caravans and trailers stood in a large circle. There was a fireplace in the middle with a few run-down garden chairs around it. Music was blaring from one of the vehicles. A man was washing clothes in a plastic tub. Another sat on the steps of his trailer, patiently picking apart a knotted nylon rope. They did not stop what they were doing when Pete and Jupe approached, but did not take their eyes off them either. There was no sign of the red-haired woman. Instead, a dark-haired young man approached them.

"What do you want?" the man asked suspiciously.

"We have a parcel for uh…" Jupiter lifted the package up and pretended to look at the address label. "We have a parcel for Dennis Freeman."

"He's dead!" said the young man.

"—But we do have this for him…" The First Investigator looked down indecisively at the parcel in his hands.

"Deliver it to the cemetery."

"—But someone has to sign for proof of delivery. That's our rule."

"I don't give a damn about rules!" The young man laughed.

"Then we'll go." Jupiter tucked the parcel under his arm.

That was the cue for Pete. He began to cough. Jupiter patted him on the back. Pete coughed even harder.

"Sorry about this," the First Investigator said apologetically to the young man.

Pete, meanwhile, put on a coughing fit that was absolutely convincing acting-wise. Jupiter, who had once worked as a child actor in television, was immediately a little envious of how well Pete played his part.

The young man just stood there, not sure what to do. Already two caravan doors were opening and people were looking out. The man behind the plastic tub dropped the laundry.

"Is everything all right?" asked a man with long blond hair.

"It's… I'm… all right," gasped Pete. "I should have… just… a sip of… water."

"Yeah, hold on!" The first man ran into one of the caravans.

"Keep at it," whispered Jupiter, "and keep your eyes open."

"What's wrong?" A young woman wearing colourful clothes came up behind the blond man.

Pete almost actually caught his breath. "Jupe!" he hissed.

"Here's some water…" The first man had come back and held out a dirty glass of cloudy liquid to Pete. "Doesn't taste good, but it's fresh from the tap."

Reluctantly, Pete took a sip. Then he took a deep breath. "Thanks. I think I'll be all right."

"Besides, we have to move on quickly," said Jupiter. "We still have a lot of parcels to deliver."

Skinny, Mina and the boy named Stan drove in Josh's old Jeep towards the coastal mountains. According to Skinny, they were headed to a grocery shop where they had bought food cheaply before.

"I hope they won't be so rude to us again," Mina said. She turned to Stan. "The last time we went shopping there, the man at the checkout called us names."

"That's because we don't walk around dressed up like the fuddy-duddies. He holds the door open for them, doesn't he?" Skinny steered the Jeep into a parking space in front of a shop. "They weren't much friendlier to us at the pharmacy either, but we just have to get through it. Shall we split up?"

"What did you have in mind?" asked Mina.

"I'll take the pharmacy and you get the groceries," suggested Skinny, "or would you prefer it the other way round?"

"No, that's fine." Mina got out of the car. "Come on, Stan, there's a lot to do."

She opened the glass door that led into the shop. A few bells rang. Stan could see the business-like smile of the man behind the sales counter abruptly turn into a grimace when he saw Mina.

"Let's get our shopping done quickly," Mina whispered to Stan.

She grabbed a shopping basket. Stan helped her gather the many things that were on the list.

They were just in the canned goods aisle when the bells rang again. A strikingly tall man in his late thirties with a military crew cut entered the shop. He wore a sheriff's uniform and moved as stiffly as if he had swallowed a broom. The man glanced around the shop, then went straight over to the counter. "Good afternoon. One pack of spearmint gum—sugar-free—please."

The cashier smiled. "Are you with Sheriff Brewer?" He put something in a brown paper bag.

"Yeah, I was just posted here. Sheriff Brewer is sick… and the little deputy with him can't handle this by herself. The proverbial arm of the law must not only be long, but also strong."

"You are so right. This place needs tough law enforcement officers."

"Yes, law and order must be maintained." He leaned against the counter.

"I am glad you are here. It's not safe to be in this neighbourhood anymore. Just today a customer from Seven Pines told me there have been burglaries there." The cashier stretched to keep Mina and Stan in view.

"Just make sure nothing gets stolen from you," said the officer. He now turned in the direction of the two as well. "Those two there look like they are out to create trouble."

The cashier nodded just about eagerly. "I know that girl. She's one of those scoundrels from the Freeman grounds… and from the looks of the other kid, he's one of them too. The way he's dressed says it all."

Mina pretended not to care about the men, but Stan noticed that her fingers were trembling slightly as she reached for a can. As quickly as possible, Mina and Stan gathered the rest of the things on the list, and even though they put everything neatly in the basket, they felt like wanted criminals as they did so.

When they went to the checkout, the officer was still there. He loomed next to a hook rack of convenience items, eyeing them sternly.

Mina and Stan walked past him with their heads bowed and placed their items on the counter.

The cashier scanned the items as if he were being forced to do so. He gave them a few bags, and Mina and Stan had to pack their purchases themselves. Eventually, Mina paid, and the two of them grabbed the bags.

"Let's get out of here," Mina murmured to Stan, and they squeezed their way to the door.

Suddenly, the officer turned to them. With a cutting voice, he ordered, "Stop right there, you two!"

Mina turned around in a panic.

"What are you hiding in your shoulder bag?" With three big steps, the officer was with the girl. He grabbed the canvas bag with the many pins and buttons that Mina carried over her shoulder.

"—But I…" She took an awkward step to the side. A spinner rack of greeting cards wobbled.

"Don't you try to escape!" The officer reached into the bag.

"Hey, you can't do that!" shouted Stan.

"Don't you tell the officer what he can and can't do," snorted the cashier.

"Well, what have we here?" The officer held up a pack of four batteries.

"Disgusting thieving scoundrels!" the cashier scolded. "She didn't pay for the batteries."

"I didn't take them," Mina defended herself. "I really didn't."

The man in the uniform ignored her protest. He nodded coolly at the cashier. "Don't worry about it, sir. I'll take care of these two law-breakers."

The officer urged Stan and Mina outside onto the pavement. They could still hear the cashier shouting a devoted "Thank you!" after the man.

"How many times do I have to tell you—I didn't steal anything," Mina gasped as the officer pulled her by the arm into the sunny car park in front of the shop. "You put that in my bag!"

"Now don't get cheeky with me!" The officer glowered at her.

"It's only the truth."

"Truth?" the officer snorted. "Old Sheriff Brewer may have had patience with you scoundrels, but I won't tolerate that kind of behaviour. Let that be a lesson to you." He grabbed Mina by the sleeve again. "Thieves will have me to deal with now."

"Let her go!" Stan took a step forward.

The officer spun towards Stan and lashed out without warning. Caught off guard, Stan moved on instinct, ducking right beneath the oncoming fist. His heart was pounding. The situation had got out of hand.

"How dare you attack me!" the officer shouted. His face turned red with anger, and he reached for the baton attached to his belt.

"You're the one who swung at me!" Stan indignantly said. "Now let go of her. She didn't steal anything."

"Oh yeah? Then where did the pack of batteries come from? Hardly from Santa Claus."

"Please, sir." Stan raised his hands placatingly. At the same time, he sensed that the officer would not be so easily calmed. The man was looking for trouble.

Across the car park, Skinny came rushing up. "Mina? Stan?"

"Hey, you! Stay where you are!" The officer raised his baton. "Don't take another step closer." With his free hand, he grabbed Mina by her black hair. She cried out as he jerked her towards him. A shopping bag slipped from her hands, landing with a soft crunch. Eggs rolled from their carton and berries tumbled out, just before a falling juice bottle smashed them into a gooey, colourful puddle on the pavement.

"Be quiet!" the officer commanded.

Stan and Skinny looked at him in horror. How could a law-enforcement officer behave like this?

"Tell your buddies that I'm not to be messed with." He still held up the baton. "I'll tell you what you're going to do now. You're going to get in your car, drive straight back to your camp and stay there. If I see you rats in the shops here one more time, I'll resort to other means. Then you're going to wish you never messed with me." He pushed Mina away from him. "Understand?" They stared at him.

"Understand?" He took a threatening step towards Stan. For a moment Stan considered objecting, but that would be unwise. He forced himself to nod.

"Understood," whispered Mina tonelessly.

"A little louder, please!"

"Understood!" all three said as if from the same mouth.

The officer lowered his baton. "Now get out of here, quick!" He turned and walked with determined steps back to the shop.

Only when the bells rang and the officer had gone into the shop did the three of them break free from their rigidity. Tears ran down Mina's face.

"What a sleazeball," Skinny exclaimed.

Stan touched Mina gently on the arm. "Are you okay?"

She nodded silently.

“There you see what the cops are like.” Skinny bent down to salvage the few unblemished items from the mess. “We can’t turn to them. They’re one hundred percent behind the Seven Pines fuddy-duddies, just like those three instigators.”

“What do we do then?” Mina rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. Her black eyeliner smudged, leaving black streaks.

“We take care of everything ourselves. Without anyone else’s help,” rumbled Skinny. “We can handle it on our own.”

“Besides, it’s all about a wooden mascot,” Stan added.

“It’s still a matter of principle,” Skinny said. “We won’t let anyone steal from us.”

“You understand that, don’t you, Stan?” asked Mina.

“Sure. I’m on your side.” Stan smiled at them. “—And if those three investigators or the officer get in our way, we’ll just take them on.”

“Wonderful! But first, let’s get out of here.” Skinny grabbed the sodden bag and led the way. “Now come on, the others are probably waiting for their food.”

Mina turned around. “Are you coming, Stan?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Behind Skinny and Mina, Stan walked back to the car. Again and again, he replayed the scene in the shop in his mind’s eye—the conversation between the cashier and the officer; the walk to the cash register; the rack of batteries; the look on the officer’s face…

All the while in the shop, Mina and Stan hadn’t even been near the battery rack, let alone taken a pack. On the other hand, the officer was standing at the rack when they walked past him. Yes, the officer must have put the batteries in Mina’s bag when she had walked past him to the cash register… but why? Because he hated people like Mina and him? Because he wanted to abuse his power? Or because he was simply evil?

A quiet doubt crept into his thoughts. Had Mina perhaps taken the batteries after all? No, she hadn’t; he should have noticed that.

Stan couldn’t make sense of what had happened in the shop. Something was not right. That man, the crew cut… There was something. He sensed it… but that was as far as he got. The rest lay hidden in his head and was currently nothing more than a blurred question mark.

## 10. The Kidnapped Iguana

"Aha!" Jupiter grinned. "So the red-haired woman with the colourful clothes is one of the campers from the Freeman grounds."

"—But there was no car there that could match the backfire noise yesterday," Pete said. "The caravans that were there would sound different, and the Thunderbird hadn't been driven for a long time. It was all dusted up and the tyres were flat."

"—And an old purple Beetle like the one Bob saw at the petrol station wasn't there either," Jupiter added, "but that doesn't mean anything. Maybe there were a few of them out with that car. More importantly, we were able to find Miss Sabre-Toothed Tiger. Through our little play we were able to clearly establish a connection between yesterday's attack at Seven Pines and the campers."

"—And perhaps even to Skinny."

"That is a possibility."

"Shall we wait here until the rest of them come back?" asked Pete. "Honestly, I don't want to stare at a couple of caravans all day. I promised Jeffrey I'd go surfing with him today."

"—But…" Jupiter continued.

"—But the case comes first," Pete finished the sentence. "No offence to the poor troubled people of Seven Pines, but I also need at least a few hours of free time during the holidays… and I don't want to completely neglect my other friends."

"That's fine," Jupiter said to Pete's surprise.

"Excuse me? Did you just say 'that's fine'? That's completely new from you, Jupe."

The First Investigator cleared his throat. "Well, I can't imagine that the Freeman campers would dare to attack again in broad daylight. That would be pretty risky." He paused for a moment. "—But there could be riots in Seven Pines again tonight. When the residents are at their gathering, there would be nobody at home. Surely that gives the campers a good opportunity to break into a house or two."

"I just wonder why. Is there that much to get in Seven Pines—except maybe high-tech toasters, brand-new gardening tools and plant fertilizers? Or do you think they're just doing it out of spite?"

"That's what we have to find out," Jupiter replied. "The best way is on site."

"So we're supposed to lie in wait again." Pete sighed. "—After sunset at the grove?"

"No. This time we'll intercept them right here—on the Freeman grounds." Jupiter started the van and drove off. "They won't get away from us again."

When Skinny, Mina and Stan drove back to the Freeman grounds in the early afternoon, Roxy was already running towards the Jeep. She was visibly excited.

"What's wrong?" Skinny pulled on the handbrake.

"Mr Bill!"

"What about him?" Mina jumped out of the car.

"Those dirtbags have him."

"What?" Mina almost dropped the shopping bag out of sheer indignation.

Roxy scratched her arm nervously. It was obvious that she found the situation amusing and annoying at the same time. “He was in his terrarium in the trailer, and I was over at Josh’s for a minute. When I came back, the door was broken into, and Mr Bill was no longer there—just a note from his kidnappers.” Roxy held out a sheet of expensive stationery to them. Mina reached for it.

*Your mascot was a warning, but you did not listen. Your scaly pet is the next in line. Rise to the challenge. Meet me on Monday at six in the evening at the abandoned tyre factory on Mono Drive. Come to the production hall in the main building if you want Mr Bill back.*

“What are they doing?” asked Mina incredulously.

Roxy snorted. “Those dirtbags are challenging us.”

“This is totally absurd!” Stan looked over Mina’s shoulder. Out of the corner of his eye he could make out a broad-shouldered man with a scowl approaching them.

“How did he take it?” Mina nodded in the man’s direction.

“Better be careful what you say,” murmured Roxy. “Paul’s on the verge of losing it.”

“That would be unwise,” said Skinny. He did not speak further, as Paul had reached the small group.

“You’ve read it?” he asked with effortless control.

Stan winced at the sight of Paul, for he was brandishing an evil, mean-looking dagger! Sunlight bled off the edge of his raised weapon, sharp enough to cut the air itself.

“I need your help, Skinny,” growled Paul. “Come on!”

Skinny swallowed. “What are you up to, Paul? You don’t want to invade Seven Pines with that dagger, do you?”

“You bet! I’m going over to Seven Pines now to tell those soulless freaks that I want Mr Bill back… and if they don’t hand him over, they’ll find out what I’m capable of.”

“Paul, you can’t do that.” Skinny tried to calm the man down.

“You bet I can! They’ve got my pet… and don’t pretend you understand what I’m going through.”

“I know what Mr Bill means to you, but if you go to Seven Pines now and start a fight, they’ll call the police and have you put in jail… and you’ll never get Mr Bill back. They’ll put him in an animal shelter. They can do that.”

“They can’t do that!” Paul almost shouted the words. “They can’t do that!”

“Yes, that’s how they do it,” said Skinny resignedly.

“Then we’ll go straight to the police,” Roxy suggested. “We’ll give them the letter.”

“The police are against us.” Mina looked at Roxy in despair. “They won’t help us.”

Skinny sat down on an empty barrel. “No, we have to be more clever about this, otherwise these people will take their anger out on Mr Bill.”

“—But we can’t wait until Monday,” said Paul. “Mr Bill needs very special care.”

“He’ll survive,” said Roxy.

“You’ve never liked him.” Paul turned accusingly to his girlfriend. “You’re just like my ex-girlfriends.”

“Paul!”

“Isn’t it true?”

“—But it’s not about your ex-girlfriends now; it’s about all of us and those Seven Pines people,” Skinny cautiously spoke up. “It’s important that we don’t rush into anything now.

We'll sit down and plan what to do… and on Monday, we'll get Mr Bill and our 'Free Spirit' back. Agreed?"

Paul did not answer, but he lowered the dagger. Suddenly, he looked limp and tired.

"Agreed, Paul?"

Still no answer came.

"Paul, please!"

"Yes, all right!"

"Do you want to sit down with us?" offered Skinny.

"No." Paul hung his head as the energy drained from his body. "I've got to get out of here for a while or I'll go crazy. I'll come back later." Turning, he dragged himself away.

"Poor Paul," said Skinny.

"Thank goodness you managed to get him not to threaten anyone with that dagger," Stan remarked.

"Nah," Skinny said, "it looks real but it is actually a bleeder."

"A what?"

"A bleeder—a bleeder dagger," Skinny repeated, "one that they use in movies. It is a prop equipped with internal tubes and a concealed bulb or pump. When an actor stabs a victim, the blade retracts into the handle, and he squeezes the bulb to release fake blood through the blade."

"It looks mighty realistic," Stan noted. "How did he get one of those?"

"It was just a week ago when he got a bit-part role in a movie," Skinny said. "He kept the dagger."

"—But I think it is still a kind of offence to use a replica weapon to threaten people," Stan said.

"Yeah… he knows it, but when he is angry, anything goes."

"It's a crazy situation," Stan agreed.

"All the better that you are here now to help us," Skinny said. "Come on, there's a lot to do before Monday. We only have two days left to prepare ourselves."

"Good!"

"We'll kick their butts!"

"On to the war council!"

A group of people trudged along behind Skinny. Stan stayed with Mina. "I'll take the groceries to your trailer." He grabbed two bags.

The campers were so upset there was no point in talking to them now. They had been through too much already. Now they wanted their revenge. None of them had even paused to look at the writing more closely. Stan, on the other hand, had noticed that the people from Seven Pines obviously knew well about the campers. They had purposefully stolen their 'Free Spirit' as if they knew it was the group's mascot, and then they had written in the letter not about 'a critter' or 'your iguana' but about 'Mr Bill'—so they knew his name. Just like in the supermarket car park, Stan had a feeling that something wasn't right. It was as if one piece of the puzzle didn't fit into the overall picture. The best thing was for him to find out for himself what was going on.

The first opportunity came when Mina put on a kettle in her caravan. The remnants of the black tear tracks were still visible on her cheeks.

"I don't believe this! How can they be so mean?" she sniffled.

"Do you mean that officer or the people from Seven Pines?" Stan asked as he put the groceries on the table.

"All of them!"

“They’re probably frantically looking for something to make their monotonous lives more interesting.”

“Yeah, probably. Do you want a coffee?” Mina fetched mugs from the cupboard.

“Yes, please.” Stan sat down. “Say, what’s going on here with the campers and the Seven Pines people? Skinny tried to explain it to me, but I still don’t quite get it. Why do they keep fighting?”

Mina poured coffee powder into a crumpled filter. “You actually just said it yourself—they have a monotonous life and hate us for being different. They go to work at eight on the dot in the morning and come back at five. We, on the other hand, do odd jobs—some work as musicians, orange pickers, painters or whatever else is needed. If we want to move on, we can, but we have always liked it here. Dennis Freeman rented us this place some time ago. The local people didn’t think it was great, but they had tolerated us.”

“—And then Freeman died.”

“Yes, and his brother, Jack Freeman, inherited this property.” Mina switched on the coffee machine. “Most importantly, the lease ends in about two months’ time. Initially, Jack wanted to sell the land, but as you can see, this place needs a lot of work to convert it to development standards. Eventually, he decided to continue renting it, which is a good thing for us as we cannot afford to buy the place. However, that’s when the people from Seven Pines came into the picture. Several of them have joined forces and contacted Jack to offer to rent the grounds in our place.”

“They have their own houses, so why would they want this place?” Stan asked.

“Firstly, the Seven Pines people don’t have access to the beach and sea from their houses, and they don’t have a common playground for their children, so this piece of land will provide them that… Secondly, they want to get rid of us.”

“So what did Mr Freeman intend to do?”

“He has proposed a settlement to both parties. We can rent the upper part of the site for a good price, and the Seven Pines people get the lower part and the beach.”

“Sounds reasonable to me. That would help everybody.”

“—But we don’t want to share anything with them… and they don’t want to share with us. They want us out of here. That’s for sure.” Mina lifted the jug out of the machine and poured a cup for Stan.

“Are there any other interested parties?” Stan asked as he accepted his coffee.

“I don’t know. We’ll meet with Mr Freeman on Tuesday. Then we’ll see who gets to rent the place. Meanwhile, we have to bear with them attacking us.”

Just then, Skinny stepped into the caravan. “There you are. I’ve been looking for you, Stan.”

“What’s wrong?” Stan replied.

“We’re holding a big war council, and of course you have to come.”

“I’ll be right there—after this coffee.” Stan said and turned back to Mina. “You know, I think the Seven Pines people are more calculating and hard-nosed than you think. On Tuesday, they want to rent the grounds outright, and in order for them to get it for sure, they’ll have to get you in real trouble beforehand—hence the challenge on Monday.”

“You mean they want to use Mr Bill’s kidnapping to provoke us into committing a crime so they can catch us in the act?” asked Mina.

“Exactly that! You drive to the agreed meeting point in a rage, raise your fist or a weapon of some sort at them, and you’ll be taken away by the police in no time. That way they can even make sure you’re still in custody when the meeting takes place on Tuesday.”

“Then we’ll stay here on Monday.” Mina sighed. “It’s safer that way.”

“We are not cowards!” Skinny retorted angrily. “If the Seven Pines people want to face us on Monday, then so be it. Bring it on! Who says the police are going to arrest us? If we play our cards right, the fuddy-duddies will walk right into our trap. Then we’ll see who ends up in jail.” He turned and stomped out of the trailer.

“We should have been at the Seven Pines gathering,” Pete said glumly as he spread out his camping mat among the nettles and undergrowth. “We could have gone undercover. Then we could have guarded the area and eaten barbecue sausages at the same time.”

“Strategically, however, this is the better position,” Jupe said. “We have a close eye on the campers.”

“Well, I can’t really see them very well…” Pete adjusted his binoculars. “They’re way too far away.”

“We can’t get any closer.” Jupiter sat down on his sleeping mat.

“If I’m not mistaken, they’re having a gathering of their own there. They’re all sitting around a bonfire.”

“Strange! I could have bet they would terrorize Seven Pines again today.”

“Is that Skinny?” Pete handed Jupe the binoculars. “The one in front on the right. He’s looking in our direction right now.”

“If only it were a little brighter. You really can’t see much like that… but you’re right. It could be Skinny.”

“If anything, he’s in cahoots with those scoundrels,” growled Pete.

“While you were out surfing today, I went to Skinny’s place.”

“What? You didn’t tell me about that earlier.”

“There’s not much to tell either. Only that his neighbour said she hadn’t seen him for a while.”

“Probably because he hangs out here on the Freeman grounds,” Pete said. He turned on his back and stared up at the hazy night sky.

“Hmm… funny!”

“What’s funny?” Pete sat up again.

Jupiter hesitated before giving an answer. “One of the boys reminds me of Bob.”

Pete laughed. “Yeah, right. Instead of going to Woodfield, Bob just stayed here and partied with our nemesis and a bunch of lawless scoundrels. Really, Jupe!”

“It’s absurd. I know… but he actually reminds me of Bob—the same movements, the blond hair…”

“Give me that!” Pete snatched the binoculars from his friend’s hands. Then he peered through them. “You mean the guy sitting all the way back there on the other side of the fire?”

“Yes. The blond one.”

“He’s not blond.”

“Pete, is it possible that you need glasses?”

“Me?” Pete gave the First Investigator an aghast look. “I can see wonderfully.”

“It’s all right.” Jupiter put on his jacket. “Do you want some chocolate bars?”

“Gladly!”

“Then run to the petrol station and get some.” Jupiter slid him a few dollars. “I’ll hold the fort until then.”

## 11. Mrs McGowan Calls

The sun was shining and the birds were singing. Stan Silver thought about how strange it was that everything could look so peaceful and yet under the surface it was bubbling like a volcano. He sat alone in front of the construction trailer and ate breakfast. Skinny had left early in the morning for a casual job.

Stan was still worried about the iguana's kidnapping and that letter. Of course, they hadn't got far with their war council last night. They had all talked out of turn and had too much to drink. All night they had been ranting at the people from Seven Pines. A sensible plan had not even begun to come together.

Finally, at six in the morning, they had given up and all disappeared into their trailers. Stan was still tired. Besides, the bump on his head hurt. The accident was still in his bones.

He was biting carefully into his bread when he saw a red-haired woman coming towards him. She was pushing an ancient bicycle beside her. For a moment, he thought it was Roxy. He wondered what she was doing on a bike… but at second glance, he realized that he had never seen this woman before.

"Hello," she greeted him as she stopped in front of Skinny's trailer.

"Hi," he replied. "Do you want to see Skinny?"

"Skinny?" She smiled uncertainly.

Stan smiled back. Although she was not his type at all, she had a friendly demeanour—the type that invited easy conversation.

"No, I don't want to see Skinny."

"Then who are you looking for? Maybe I can help you."

"I'm not looking for anyone—at least not a person." She looked over at the trailer. "This used to be my trailer, by the way. I sold it."

"—And now you want it back?" Stan hoped that wasn't the case. Where else were Skinny and he going to live? The trailer was their home.

"Don't worry. I don't want it back." Apparently she had guessed his thoughts. "I just found that I can't find my lucky bracelet again. Maybe it's here."

"Your lucky bracelet? What does it look like?"

"A leather bracelet with a glass bead on it. It's in the shape of a bee."

"I think I'm good at finding lost items," Stan said. "Yes, I believe I've done it before."

"You believe?" the young woman repeated, amused.

"I suffer from amnesia," Stan explained.

"What is it?"

"I had an accident… and now I don't remember pretty much everything."

"Really? What don't you remember?"

"Name, age, origin, life story… basically everything."

"I'm sorry," she said sincerely. Stan could tell she really meant it.

"So if you want, I'll look for the bracelet with you."

"No, I think I'll just go. I don't want to run into Paul or Roxy." Her voice was calm, but her bright blue eyes flickered. Was she anxious? Or just nervous? "—And if you find the bracelet, you can give it to Mina. She knows my lucky bracelet and where to find me."

“If you don’t want to meet Paul, he’s out right now,” Stan said, “and Roxy’s in her trailer.”

“Are they all right?”

Stan thought about what he should answer. The story about the kidnapped iguana was on the tip of his tongue, but then he noticed the tense expression on the young woman’s face. She was looking at him expectantly—as if she hoped to hear something terrible. That did not fit in at all with her otherwise amiable manner, so he decided not to mention anything about the iguana’s kidnapping. It was better to remain silent.

He shrugged his shoulders demonstratively. “I guess so.”

She ran her hand through her red curls. “It was stupid of me to come. I really have no business here anymore.” The sparkle in her eyes gave way to a sad look. “—But sometimes you do stupid things, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Well, I’ll be off then.”

“Take care!”

“You too!”

As she pushed her bike away across the camp, Stan looked after her in confusion. Then it struck him that he hadn’t even asked her for her name.

The telephone rang. Jupiter awoke abruptly from a strange dream in which Pete’s surfing friend Jeffrey was selling lemon rolls in a bakery on the beach. Pete had eaten a huge quantity of them, while he, Jupiter, had gone empty-handed. So the dream was clearly in the nightmare category.

He shook his head to clear his head. Then he idly picked up the phone. “Uh… The Three Investigators… Jupiter Jones speaking.” He stifled a yawn.

It was only at seven in the morning that Pete and he had left the observation post. Nothing had happened. The campers had merely partied late into the night. A glance at the clock told the First Investigator that it was almost noon. He had, without realizing it, fallen asleep on the desk chair at Headquarters.

“Very good to reach you, Jupiter,” he heard a female voice say excitedly. “I want to engage you again after all, and the neighbours want it as well.”

“Mrs McGowan?” the First Investigator asked.

“Yes, it’s me. Please come over as soon as possible. Something terrible has happened.”

All at once, Jupiter was wide awake. It didn’t take him long to gather his things and get on his bike. He didn’t call Pete but just sent him a text message. The Second Investigator had to help Kelly at her family’s garage sale.

With the wind at his back, Jupiter covered the distance in a hurry. He was a little out of breath when he locked his bike at the back of Mrs McGowan’s house. She had obviously been waiting for him outside and came to meet him, holding a basket of raisin buns.

“Where are your colleagues?” she asked as he stepped up to her.

“One of them is unfortunately away at the moment, and the other one will hopefully join us soon,” he explained.

“It’s good that at least you could come,” she said. “We’d best go straight over to my nephew. It’s really urgent.”

In much too slow, small steps, the woman led Jupiter to the neighbour’s house. It was painted sky blue and looked like it had been ordered from a catalogue. At first glance,

everything matched shockingly well—from the pristine white wooden fence to the blue and white flower borders to Mrs Fraser opening the door for them in a blue and white dress.

On second glance, however, Jupiter noticed the little beauty flaws—the smile Mrs Fraser was attempting was more of a grimace. It was as false as her hair colour—a fake blonde.

"I thought you were bringing three investigators, Cynthia?" she said in a husky voice.

"This is one of them. They are very young, but Rosie recommended them to me. She read an article in the newspaper that said they investigate anything."

"Well, in that case…" Mrs Fraser didn't sound convinced, but she didn't stop smiling. "Well, please come in then. I've put some lemonade on ice." She led Jupiter and Mrs McGowan into a bright living room. Here too, everything was colour-coordinated. "Why don't you take a seat? I'll call my husband. He… has the letter."

This time there were no slip covers. Jupiter had come straight from the salvage yard and was sure to have a little dirt and sand on his trousers. The Frasers' white sofa, however, looked as if even microscopic particles could be seen on it. Before he could sit down, Mr Fraser came into the room. Jupiter was relieved that he could now remain standing.

"So we meet again!" The sleek man walked straight up to the First Investigator and held out his hand. The First Investigator could tell he was trying hard to appear calm. Under the surface, however, something was bubbling; Jupe sensed it immediately. He lent his voice a business-like tone as he said, "Your aunt called me to say that there was interest in hiring us after all."

"That's right." Mr Fraser patted his aunt's shoulder as if she were a good horse. "We need help badly."

"It's just awful," said Mrs Fraser. She disappeared into the kitchen to get the drinks.

Mr Fraser took a deep breath. "Last night those vandals went to extremes."

"What do you mean?" Jupiter asked.

Mr Fraser did not answer immediately. He clenched his hands into fists and then opened them again. "Those campers broke in here."

"—And not just that," Mrs McGowan said with a trembling voice.

Jupiter looked at Mr Fraser again.

"My aunt is right. Those vandals broke in here… and they stole one of my prized items."

## 12. Burglary at Seven Pines

"What prized item?" Jupiter's mouth went dry.

Wordlessly, Mr Fraser handed the First Investigator a badly battered piece of paper written in large red letters.

> *Your prized possession is suffering, Fraser! Leaf after leaf is already sailing to the ground. Only you can stop this. Come to the abandoned tyre factory on Mono Drive at six o'clock on Monday with your vigilantes. Come to the production hall in the main building, or your tree will be gone… and no police!*

"So much hatred," said Mrs McGowan in a strained voice. "The poor tree."

"They stole a tree?" asked Jupiter. He tried hard to ask this question with the necessary seriousness.

"It's not just any tree!" exclaimed Mr Fraser. "It's a bonsai. I've been tending this one specimen for twelve years. It is a rare variety and it has won many prizes. Mr Davis's lawn cannot even match that."

"Bonsais are miniature trees that you keep in bowls," explained Mrs Fraser.

"I know," said Jupiter. "To be more precise, it is a traditional East Asian art form in which trees are kept small for aesthetic purposes, commonly using pines, junipers, and Japanese maples."

"You are very well informed," said Mr Fraser, but it didn't sound like praise coming out of his mouth. "Then perhaps you can understand what a blow this is to me."

"The letter was in the conservatory." Mrs Fraser was visibly distraught. Jupe feared she would drop the tray of glasses at any moment. "You'd almost think they'd broken in here deliberately… as if they knew we owned this tree."

"Was the conservatory locked?" asked Jupiter.

"Yes, of course!" Mrs Fraser put down the glasses. Lemonade sloshed onto the white coffee table. "We were at the party and we had the house well-secured. The alarm was on and the door locked. When we came back, we didn't think anything bad had happened. Before Brian went to bed, he went to check on the tree in the conservatory and found it was gone. Only this horrible note was in its place."

"—And you didn't see or hear anything suspicious? Were there perhaps signs of burglary on the door or windows?" asked Jupiter.

"No, nothing… I looked right away," replied Mr Fraser.

"So the burglar seems to know the way around your house, and knows how important the tree is to you. Have you had contact with people from the Freeman grounds in the past?"

Mr Fraser blushed. His wife and Mrs McGowan gave him a questioning look, but he shook his head vehemently. "There used to be a connection between… well, us and those people, but that's been resolved, thankfully!" Mr Fraser cleared his throat. "It's irrelevant to what's happening now. Those people stole my tree because they're thieves with nothing on their minds but causing trouble."

Mrs McGowan nodded in agreement.

"—But that can't be all!" Jupiter persisted. "There must be something that has triggered this confrontation—something that can cause such hatred. Perhaps there is a bigger picture to this."

"Well, it started after the barbecue guy died." Mr Fraser reached for a glass of lemonade. "His brother, Jack Freeman, inherited the property, and we asked him if he wanted to rent it to us instead of those scoundrels. It's not a good building site, but the little beach is really picturesque and the lemon grove on the border of our estate is a dream. It could even win us prizes at a national level in the next suburban competition. All the residents here in Seven Pines were excited about the idea of turning the Freeman grounds into a private park and a playground for the children."

"Can you build your own park on this piece of land?"

"Yes, we have checked with the authorities," Mr Fraser said. "Such private land can be developed into a private park, provided it complies with local zoning laws, land use regulations, and environmental standards. We have offered to build the park and the playground as an incentive for Jack to rent the place to us."

"So what was Mr Freeman's response?" asked Jupiter.

"He finds those raggedy guys so sympathetic that he considered letting them continue renting the camping ground. Only after we explained our plan to him in more detail did he partially relent, but his own idea was absurd."

"In what way?" Jupe took a sip of lemonade.

"He's offered to rent us half the grounds. We get the southern part and access to the beach, and those scoundrels get the space around the old barbecue restaurant and the dirt path to the site."

"—But this idea doesn't sound so bad," Jupiter commented.

"Not bad? We're not sharing a plot of land with those scoundrels!" Mr Fraser was furious. "Those ruthless burglars! On Tuesday we'll all meet at Jack Freeman's ranch. That's when he will make the final decision… but I don't like what is currently on offer. I just want those scoundrels out of the area."

"On Tuesday… hmm…" Jupiter pinched at his lower lip, a sign that he was thinking hard. "Then this letter here could be a trap. The campers are provoking you and your neighbours by encroaching on your gardens and stealing your tree until you get carried away with a careless act. I am afraid these people want to prevent you from going to the ranch on Tuesday by all means. In any case, be careful on Monday."

"I've hired you to look around the Freeman grounds tonight. I'll take care of the rest myself." Mr Fraser stood up. "We'll face the vandals and get the bonsai back… and then we'll deal with Jack Freeman."

"Don't forget to call Beatrix," Mrs McGowan spoke up. "You have an appointment with her for a birthday dinner at six o'clock."

"I just don't have the time for that now!" growled Mr Fraser.

"As you like—but it's her nineteenth birthday," Mrs McGowan added.

"Aunt Cynthia, please!" Mr Fraser furrowed his eyebrows. "This urgent matter just cropped up. I'm sure she'll understand…"

"I just think these are terrible times." Mrs McGowan clung to the basket of raisin buns as if it were a life preserver.

"Mr Fraser," Jupiter said, "do you perhaps have a photograph of the bonsai? It might help us with the investigation at the Freeman grounds."

"Of course!" Brandon Fraser walked over to a chest of drawers on which were several silver frames. "We have lots of photographs of it."

"A recent one would be good," said Jupiter.

"Take this one…" Mr Fraser handed Jupiter a photo showing what looked like a misshapen cross between a parsley bush and a shrivelled field oak. "I hope you find it."

"We'll do our best," promised Jupiter.

"If only we had a capable sheriff." Mrs McGowan sighed and looked round. "Would anyone like a raisin bun?"

"I'm done!" Pete threw himself onto the old folding couch in Headquarters. "First that uncomfortable night at the Freeman grounds and then the garage sale at Kelly's. I stood in the sun for ages selling ugly vases, old carpets and even stuffed toys."

"Did you at least get something in return?" Jupiter sat down behind the desk.

"A little," Pete replied, and straightened up. "The day did have one good thing about it."

"What was that?"

"Kelly was cleaning her room yesterday to collect things for the garage sale. In the process, she got her hands on this…" He handed a flyer to the First Investigator. It said in colourful letters 'Dance Revue at the Rocky Beach Community Centre'. Underneath was a photo of a group of girls in costume.

"The one on the far left is Kelly," said Pete redundantly.

Looking closer, Jupiter realized it was an old picture. Kelly looked younger and her hair was still brown instead of blonde. "It looked better on her," Jupiter remarked.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is the girl next to her—that's Bee!"

"Bee?" Jupiter echoed. "—The one that had contact with the campers from the Freeman grounds?"

"The very one! She has red curls. She even looks a bit like the sabre-toothed tiger."

The First Investigator took a closer look at the photo. Next to Kelly stood a slender girl with red curls. "I don't know. The nose looks different… and the eyes…"

"Wait a minute," Pete said. "I think it looks more like the woman in Bob's photo taken at the petrol station."

"Hmm…" Jupe murmured and took a look at the two photos. "You're right, Pete. The person in Kelly's flyer looks like a younger version of the woman in Bob's photo."

"—And now read the caption with the names," Pete urged his friend.

"Beatrix Fraser," Jupe said tonelessly. He looked up. "She's the link between the Seven Pines people and the campers. Of course! Mrs Fraser was talking about a Beatrix."

"When?"

Jupiter told Pete about the visit to the Frasers and the stolen bonsai.

"—And it's Beatrix's birthday on Monday." Jupiter finished his report.

"Well, great! Her father cancels an appointment with her to meet with the burglars of his green stuff. That must really annoy her!"

"I think it was a test… and he didn't pass it," Jupiter mused.

"—And now she's sitting with the campers, snorting with rage and thinking of a revenge plan. Maybe she'll saw the tree into pieces and use them for their campfire."

"Mr Fraser said that the bonsai was taken last night. However, we have been monitoring the campers all night. None of them left the camp, not even the red-haired sabre-toothed tiger."

"Maybe this Beatrix alias Bee has hired someone," Pete suggested, "and if Mr Fraser wants us to investigate the camp, we will. We just have to be careful."

“Sure, if they get their hands on us, we’ll have a bad time,” Jupiter noted. “We’ll sneak up from the back this time. If all goes well, we can get a look inside their trailers.” Jupiter pulled on his black jacket. “The camping ground is not lit, and tonight is a new moon. They won’t see us in the darkness.”

“Darkness? There’s a fog soup out there,” Pete countered.

“All the better, then no one will see us.”

“I hope you’re right.” Pete began to rummage his dark clothes out of a box at the back of their trailer.

## 13. No Holds Barred

"That's the best joke I've ever heard!" Skinny fought another fit of laughter.

"Funny that I could remember it." Stan scratched his head.

"Just watch your wound," admonished Skinny.

The two of them were sitting inside Skinny's trailer eating chips out of a bag. Despite the heavy fog, Paul, Roxy and the San Diego boys were down the beach gathering in front of a small campfire. The rest of the campers had gone to a party in Los Angeles.

"—And I've never told you that joke before?" said Stan in amazement. "I thought we were friends."

"The best!" Skinny said, "—But I guess you haven't known the joke for long—maybe only recently, just before your accident."

"I hope I'm ready for action tomorrow," Stan remarked. "This is going to be a tricky one."

Although Skinny was his best friend and was fun to be with, Stan felt that, at times, that guy behaved strangely. Perhaps Skinny was keeping something important from him.

"By the way… the woman who sold you this construction trailer was here today." Stan decided to change the subject.

"Bee?"

"She had red curls—just like Roxy."

"Yes, that is Bee, Paul's ex-girlfriend. Somehow, all his flames have been redheads." He laughed.

"—And Bee used to live here?"

"Yes, but that was before I came here. Paul broke up with her, got together with Roxy, and Bee moved away. That's all I know about it."

Stan wanted to keep talking, but an inner voice told him it was better to keep quiet. They were silent for a while until Skinny reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

"You want one?" Skinny offered.

"I didn't know I smoked," Stan said.

"Sure you did," Skinny replied, "when we were hanging out together." He then put one stick in his mouth, lit it, and took a deep drag. Stan dodged the smoke. It didn't smell good.

"You know…" Skinny said, "here's your chance to hear about your old life for once, and all you ask about are, of all things, other guys' ex-girlfriends. So if I were you, I'd want to know other things."

"Like what?"

Skinny made a meaningful face that unsettled Stan.

"Come on, what do you mean?" Stan asked.

"Oh, never mind…" Skinny reached into the pack of cigarettes and pulled one out. "Come on, I'll light this one up for you—for old times' sake."

"Well, maybe my memory will come back if I do everything the way I used to." Stan put the cigarette between his lips and Skinny lit it.

Then Stan took a careful drag on the cigarette. Almost immediately he felt sick. “It’s disgusting!” he gasped.

“It’s your favourite,” Skinny said with a suppressed grin. “Try it again and see if you can remember.”

Stan took another drag. He waited for it to get better… but it didn’t, and his memory didn’t come back at all. He was annoyed with himself and with Skinny, as a real friend should have encouraged him to give up smoking.

“You look pretty green.” Skinny took the cigarette from Stan’s hand.

“I think I’m going to throw up!” Stan stood up, staggering. “I’ve got to go outside.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” he asked. “It’s really foggy out there.”

“No, that’s fine.”

“Paul, Roxy and their friends are out there around their campfire,” Skinny said and opened the door for Stan. “My goodness, such a foggy soup. It looks like something out of a horror movie. If you’re not back in ten minutes, I’ll send out a search party.”

Skinny took a baseball bat from a box beside the door. “Here, take this with you—in case you get attacked by zombies!” He laughed.

“It’s useless out there, isn’t it?” Stan managed a tired grin. “I can’t see a thing.”

“Well, if something attacks you, you just start swinging the bat, never mind whether you can see anything or not,” Skinny said. “Better be safe than sorry.”

Nevertheless, Stan took the baseball bat with him. As he didn’t want to throw up right by the caravans, he dragged himself, retching, to the grove that bordered the camping ground to the north.

The nausea slowly subsided. The outside air did him good. Stan took a deep breath. He felt things more than he saw them. Slowly, he wandered step by step past a fireplace and then walked near the trees where he saw an old car that seemed to be rusting away.

The fog shrouded everything in a grey-black cloak. It was like wandering through a strange world. Stan reached out his hand. He felt the bark of a tree, then the craggy surface of a boulder. He might be at the edge of the grove, but he couldn’t be sure.

He sat down. Here, where no light illuminated the night, he could hardly see his hand in front of his eyes. In the fog, everything sounded as if it were far away—the leaves of the eucalyptus trees rustling in the sea breeze, the animals in the undergrowth, the people down on the beach.

Somewhere an owl was calling. It sounded as if the call was coming through cotton wool. So did the cracking of branches, and then he heard footsteps… or was he mistaken? No, someone was actually coming through the grove!

Stan pressed himself closer to a large pine tree. His fingers clutched the baseball bat. Branches cracked again. There had to be at least two people! One of them was moving rather clumsily.

“Geez, Jupe… the flashlight’s useless in this fog,” he heard a soft voice.

It was followed by “Keep it off! It’ll only alert them we are here.”

Jupe? The name sounded familiar to him. Of course! ‘Jupe’ should be short for ‘Jupiter’—Jupiter Jones! That had to be The Three Investigators there in the grove… and they were coming right at him! In a moment, they could cut him off from Skinny’s trailer. Stan hoped they wouldn’t even see him in the thick fog. He ducked behind the large rock like an animal.

“We’ll split up,” murmured the voice that obviously belonged to Jupe, who was standing very close to him!

"Then I'll go to the left," the second person replied. Was that Pete Crenshaw or Bob Andrews? The answer was not long in coming.

"Okay, Pete… but be careful!"

The third member Bob apparently did not tag along with the other two… or was he lurking somewhere else in the darkness? Most importantly, Stan remembered Skinny's warning to better stay out of the way of the rogue investigators… but on second thought, maybe it wasn't a bad idea to follow one of them and observe what they were doing.

Stan felt as if he had watched people before—like a spy. He grinned at the idea. Judging from where the voices were coming from, he followed the one called Pete. He could hardly see him, but he heard his soft footsteps.

Like a predator, Pete crept towards the caravans. What was he going to do? Start a fire? Cut the cables again? Puncture the tyres of the vehicles? It could not be good!

Stan felt nausea rising in him again. He made a clumsy move and almost fell. He reached out into nothingness. There was no tree, no branch to hold on to—only thousands of drops of fog. Wildly he rowed his right arm while his left clutched the baseball bat. Had this Pete heard him?

Stan's heart skipped a beat. He tried to make out something in the dark, cloud-like fog around him. Where was Pete? He couldn't see him. Inwardly he cursed the fact that there were no outdoor lights at the grounds.

Something rustled. It was very close to him—much too close. He heard someone breathing. It had to be Pete. What to do? Scream? Run away? Attack? But he was paralysed.

Perhaps Pete crept on in a different direction? Or maybe he was mistaken and had only imagined the breathing noises? But that was not the case. No, the person was slowly taking a step towards him! Stan could make out the shadowy outline of his opponent.

Within seconds, all the bad things Skinny had told him about The Three Investigators and especially about Pete raced through Stan's mind. He also thought of Roxy, who had barely escaped Pete. He had beaten her just like that—a defenceless woman! Before that, The Three Investigators had unconscionably chased him onto the road—in front of a moving car! They couldn't be bothered that he would be run over. Panic rose in him… and rage!

With a mighty leap, Stan jumped towards Pete, who was not prepared for the attack. The investigator flinched, but he had already caught himself and deftly fended Stan off. An elbow hit Stan hard on the shoulder, and he dropped the baseball bat. The pain, however, only made him angrier. He lashed out wildly. Anyway, because of the fog, it was better to fight blindly and just deal blows.

Pete cried out—Stan had hit him! He, little Stan! That gave him courage. However, the rogue investigator immediately retaliated and pushed Stan away, who lost his balance and fell ungently on the ground, biting his lip. He tasted blood, but he did not give up and did not say a word. He would not scream. Already he was on his feet again. With full force he threw himself at his opponent.

Pete had not expected such furious resistance. He was a skilled fighter, but his opponent was angry—very angry… and persistent.

Every time after Pete had performed a successful defensive manoeuvre, his opponent attacked again as if nothing had happened. Pete shied away from using the harder holds or striking back with a clenched fist. That was unsportsmanlike. Besides, his opponent could be seriously injured in the process, but if he held back, his opponent would finish him off.

Who knew how dangerous these scoundrels from the Freeman grounds were? At any moment, his opponent could draw a knife… or some other weapon! And Pete couldn't see enough to properly assess his enemy. In fact, he couldn't see anything at all. It was far too dark and foggy. If only Jupiter were around and finally intervened. However, Pete hardly dared to hope for that. The First Investigator had probably long since lost his way somewhere in the fog.

Pete bumped his back against a tree. The little beast in human form kicked his shin. Pete suppressed another cry of pain. He tried to push his opponent away, inviting a retaliation of claws scratching his face like a cat gone wild. That was enough! The Second Investigator took a swing—and scored a direct hit! His opponent flinched and gasped.

Pete was startled. The opponent sounded like Bob! He shook himself. That was nonsense. Bob was not here. It had to be his senses playing tricks on him, but he couldn't let himself be distracted.

Again, Pete lashed out, angrier than before. He caught the attacker on the shoulder, but almost at the same time, a fist slammed into his own stomach. The Second Investigator felt the pain like hundreds of little sparks racing through his body.

Pete fought against the rising nausea, but he did not want to give up. He was bigger and stronger. He would defeat his opponent yet. They collided hard with their heads. Pete saw stars. Then he tasted blood. Where it came from didn't matter now. He had to stay calm, keep fighting, and not give up.

Just then, a trailer door opened. Someone peered out into the night. "Stan?"

Moments later, the door slammed shut.

Pete hardly noticed. He had more important things to do than take care of that other guy. He had to save himself!

It was 'no holds barred'—at least that's how it seemed to Stan. He could not remember ever having fought like this. However, his memories didn't go back very far either.

He punched, kicked, bit and scratched as best he could. This could not go on. They couldn't fight until one of them died in the process.

Suddenly he heard clumsy footsteps in the branches. It had to be the other investigator called Jupiter. Stan felt a chill run down his spine because his chances had just drastically worsened with the appearance of a second opponent. What could he do now?

A blow from Pete missed his chin by a hair's breadth. How could Stan possibly come up with a plan to save himself? A second blow whizzed past his ear. His opponent grew angrier with each passing moment. He seemed to have endless strength. A push threw Stan onto his back. He felt something hard between his shoulder blades. It was the baseball bat! Now would be his chance to gain the upper hand. Promptly he grabbed the bat and stood up.

"Go away!" he shouted into the void. "Get away from me, Jupiter Jones!"

"Bob?" The voice of the one called Jupiter came through the fog.

"Bob?" Now Pete also gasped.

Stan realized that the third member of rogue investigators was here as well, and now he might be up against all three of them! He couldn't remember having played baseball before, but he swung the bat up around his shoulder as if he were about to hit a home run.

"Tell Bob to stand back," Stan warned. "I have a baseball bat and I will swing it if any of you come near me!"

"—But…" Pete objected.

"No buts! Get lost or I'll knock you three out with my baseball bat!"

Jupiter could see nothing. Annoyed, he waved the fog away from under his nose. The situation had got completely out of hand, and now there was also this voice that sounded like Bob! He was confused.

"Pete, where are you?" he asked into the darkness.

"Go away from here!" came Bob's voice in reply.

The First Investigator pinched frantically at his lower lip. At that moment, however, it didn't help. He, Jupiter Jones, the great thinker, could not make sense of what was happening. He took a step forward. Leaves rustled under his feet.

"Stay away!" The voice, so similar to Bob's, sounded panicked. "—Or I'll swing!"

Jupe tried to get his bearings. Where were the two of them? He thought he heard Pete talking softly… but from where? Again, he took a step.

"Didn't you hear me?" came angrily out of the fog. "One step closer and I'll swing!"

"Jupe! Please!" That was Pete!

Jupiter spun around on his own axis. "I don't know where I am!" Again, small branches cracked under his feet.

"I…" Jupiter began, but he didn't get any further.

Something whirred through the air, and immediately there was a scream.

Jupiter winced. Then, the fog swallowed the sound.

## 14. Escape Through the Fog

"Pete?" asked Jupiter in a hoarse voice. There was no reply. "Pete?" Again, nothing.

This was not real! This just couldn't be real! The First Investigator decided he was caught in a bad dream. He pinched his upper arm. Why didn't he wake up? He pinched a second time. This was no dream. Their opponent had battered Pete with a baseball bat!

Somewhere in the fog he heard footsteps. Then came the voice of Skinny calling out, "Where are you, Stan?"

Jupiter forced himself to remain calm. Emotions were out of place now. He took one deep breath and then exhaled. His hands stopped shaking, but he knew that his self-control would not last forever. It was just enough for the moment. With painstaking control, he crept forward to where he had heard Skinny.

Stan's heart was pounding. He had not wanted to swing the bat, but Pete had fought back. That was when it had just happened. He guessed that his swing hit his opponent on the shoulder. What if it had hit him on the head? All of a sudden, Stan regretted his action and was shaking all over.

Before he could think anymore, his opponent stirred. He groaned. Stan hoped that Pete would recover from the shock… and then what would happen next?

"Pete?" Jupiter called out to his friend.

Stan thrust a hand forward and covered Pete's mouth. Let that Jupiter believe for a while longer that his friend was down and out.

"Stan?" This time it was Skinny calling out into the fog. Pete struggled and tried to sit up, which threw Stan off balance. He dropped the baseball bat again… and already Pete landed a punch to his chin!

Stan fell back but managed to shout as loud as he could, "Help! Help!" He hoped that Paul and the San Diego boys would hear him… but what about Skinny?

Moments later, he heard several people approaching. The first to appear was Skinny. He waved his flashlight restlessly, trying to locate Stan. "Stan! Where are you?"

"Here! Help me!" Stan tried to hold Pete's arms. Something dark was bending over him. This wasn't Skinny, was it?

"Pete?" It had to be that Jupiter. Stan noticed that his voice was trembling. Was he afraid that his friend was knocked unconscious?

"Jupe!" Pete replied before Stan could stop him. "Here I am!"

"Pete!" Jupiter suddenly sounded incredibly relieved, but he still had to deal with Stan. The rogue investigators would not get away from him that easily.

Stan pushed Jupiter away and grabbed Pete with all his might. He would not let him get away—not now that he finally had reinforcements. Maybe they could exchange him for the mascot and the iguana.

Pete tried with all his might to break free, and he was quite strong, but Stan managed to cling on to him.

"We have to go!" gasped Jupiter. "There are more of them coming!" And he was right about that.

Stan heard the angry voices of Paul and his friends accompanied by flashlight beams twitching wildly through the fog.

Jupiter frantically tried to pull Pete away from Stan as Skinny and the others came closer and closer. A sudden glare cut across the ground, exposing Pete's bloodied face in the dark. For a moment, Stan thought he was winning, but then Pete tore himself away with a mighty jerk. Stan staggered back. He half turned to face his approaching friends. The light blinded him.

In his attempt to escape, Pete shoved Stan away. Stan staggered back and his head rammed onto the body of the junk car with full force. He felt like he was flying while the world around him shattered into millions of shards. He tried to catch his breath. This time he did not fall into bottomless darkness. The world did not dissolve… but the pain remained too.

"Jupe? … Pete? …" he gasped.

Jupiter tried to sort out the chaos in his head. He was overjoyed that Pete was conscious, confused by the voice that sounded so familiar—much like Bob's, and panicked as the people were approaching them through the fog.

His mind commanded him to block out the first two feelings and worry only about the danger for the time being. It was high time he did, because Skinny had just reached them. His flashlight beam danced in restless circles. "Stan?"

Who was Stan? Jupe looked in the direction from which Bob's voice had come. In the unsteady cone of light, he recognized the abandoned car. Then there was only fog again.

Once again Skinny called out, "Stan? Where are you?"

Out of desperation, Jupiter pulled out his flashlight and clicked it on. He swept the beam through the soup, hoping the light would catch on someone.

Jupe's beam sliced through the dark and caught the frame of a car. There—lying on the cold ground beside the vehicle—was a motionless shape. Jupe looked closer, and then he saw a face.

Bob! It really was Bob! But how… No time for that now. Whatever was behind all this, now it was time to react. Before Skinny could do anything, Jupiter was at the car.

"Uh…" Bob slowly straightened up.

"Come on, come with me!" The First Investigator whispered and grabbed Bob by the arm. He feared resistance, but there was none. Startled, he noticed that the fog quickly lifted and revealed several shadows that were running towards them.

"Get out of here!" shouted Jupiter. He hoped that Pete would not play the hero. With Bob by the hand, he dashed into the grove.

Bob was totally dazed for a moment. A wealth of memories forced themselves upon him.

He was Bob Andrews… of course! This realization confused him, and the one who had just pulled him through the undergrowth was Jupiter—his friend Jupiter Jones.

"Someone's got Stan!" he heard Skinny call behind him. Wordlessly, Jupiter and Pete struggled through the undergrowth ahead of him. The beam of a flashlight flitted over their heads.

Bob fought the urge to just let himself fall. The wound on his head throbbed. His legs felt like lead, but Jupiter did not let go of him.

"Down there!" The First Investigator dragged him down a slope.

"They've got Stan!" shouted Skinny. "They're taking him hostage!"

"We'll get them!" roared Paul, upset, from some distance away.

“Can you find your way back, Pete?” asked Jupiter frantically. Twigs slapped their faces.

Pete did not answer. He pulled his two friends to a hollow. Then he pushed them down. They had barely ducked behind some bushes when a ray of light slid over the hollow.

“Where are they?” shouted one of the San Diego boys.

“I’ll flatten them if I catch them!” growled Paul.

Jupiter had the unpleasant feeling that his breath could be heard a long way off. He let go of Bob and clamped a hand over his friend’s mouth. “Don’t make a sound,” he whispered. Once again, a beam of light danced over them.

“They’ve escaped!” a disgruntled voice was heard.

“I’ll take care of it tomorrow, I promise.” That was Skinny.

“No, they must still be here somewhere.” Paul sounded incensed.

Jupiter heard someone barging through the undergrowth with brisk steps. He closed his eyes. If this Paul was even half as strong as he was angry, the encounter with him would not be very pleasant—especially as there were also at least four or five other men roaming through the grove with him. Jupiter calculated that their chances in a fight were nil.

“They’re gone!” Skinny called out.

“He’s right!”

“Paul!”

“Yeah, all right!” Paul seemed to be thinking.

“Shall we turn back?”

“Yeah… might as well.”

The Three Investigators remained lying in the hollow for quite a while until there was really nothing more to be heard from the others. Then they got up.

Wordlessly, Jupe and Bob followed Pete through the forest. It was a long time before they reached the road.

They didn’t see the MG until their shins were almost touching the bumper. Pete pulled the keys out of his pocket.

“Faster!” murmured Jupiter. “They might change their minds and come after us.”

Pete said nothing, but yanked the doors open. Jupiter and Bob jumped into the car.

“Fog lights on!” Jupiter commanded. “—And make your way to the main road. It’s better lit.”

Only after a few minutes did the boys dare to breathe a sigh of relief.

“They won’t come after us,” Jupiter said. “Skinny knows we have a direct line to the police. He’ll have to answer to Cotta if he lays siege to Seven Pines.”

Then Jupiter turned to Bob. “Well… Bob?” For a moment, even the articulate First Investigator didn’t know what to say in this situation. He first had to process what had just happened—Bob’s unexpected appearance, the anxious minutes when he had thought Pete was unconscious, the escape through the grove. “I thought you had knocked Pete out.”

“Thanks, guys,” croaked Bob. It was not a suitable answer, but it was better than nothing.

Jupiter smiled, but Pete said nothing. He remained silent until they were waiting for someone to attend to them in the emergency room of Rocky Beach Hospital.

For the first time, Bob now had the opportunity to look Pete in the face with the lights on. He was almost as frightened as he had been when he saw his own reflection in Mina’s bathroom. Pete was badly battered.

“You hit me with a baseball bat!” said the Second Investigator tonelessly. “You could have knocked out my head with that.”

Bob fell silent.

Pete did not look at him. He looked at his shoulder through the neckline of his T-shirt. “You don’t use something like that at such close range. You could have caused serious damages. I thought… we used to be friends.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were a friend out there.”

“I called you by name. You should have recognized me—at least by my voice… and then Jupe called out too, but you swung that bat anyway.”

Bob realized that his friend did not understand the situation at all. How could he?

“Give him some time,” Jupiter said appeasingly to Bob.

“I wasn’t myself. I mean, I didn’t even know I was Bob until just now.”

Pete let himself fall onto the couch. “What kind of absurd story is that?” He carefully felt for a series of bloody scratches on his cheek.

“It is indeed an absurd story… and a long story… but if you want, I can tell it to you.” Bob stretched carefully.

Jupiter looked at him with curiosity. “We are all ears, Bob.”

## 15. New Rules of the Game

"Hard to believe!" Pete exclaimed when Bob had finished his report after a long time.

Mr and Mrs Crenshaw had picked up the boys from the hospital. As it was late, they had allowed Bob and Jupiter to stay the night with Pete.

"You have a tendency to lose your memory," remarked Jupiter. "Something similar happened to you back in the *Silver Spider* case."

"It always happens to me," Bob muttered, reaching up to feel the bump above his eye. Since the fight with Pete, it had been joined by other bumps and bruises. "—But at least I knew who I was then." He shook his head in disbelief. "Oh boy, am I glad to have that behind me. That was like a bad dream you want to wake up from but don't know how."

"That must be terrible," said Jupiter seriously.

"The whole week was terrible," replied Bob, "and then to top it off, I got into a fight with my best friend."

"I'll survive," Pete said. He pressed an ice pack to his cheek and smiled tentatively. Bob smiled back, which hurt quite a bit.

Pete stood up and nudged Bob against his upper arm, which also hurt a little but it didn't matter. "If we were little girls, we'd probably be crying and falling into each other's arms right now."

"Yeah, lucky we're real guys, huh?"

"Yep."

They sat silently next to each other for a while until Jupe spoke up. "There is one thing I can't get out of my head. Both sides have received threatening letters, and both sides suspect the other of having stolen something from them."

"Yes, and both objects actually have something in common." Pete tugged at his duvet.

"What?"

"They are small and green!" The Second Investigator laughed softly.

"Very funny…" Jupiter pretended not to find the remark funny at all.

However, Pete detected a slight twitch around the corners of his mouth. "So, what's on your mind, Jupe?"

"I still don't quite understand why not only the tree but also the iguana disappeared. Surely that doesn't make sense if this Beatrix is one of the campers? Would she harm her own people? What do you think, Bob?" Jupiter turned to his colleague… but he had already fallen asleep.

"When in doubt, Skinny alone is behind it—out of pure malice." Pete yawned.

"Out of pure malice?" Jupiter could clearly be seen to be brooding. "No, that's not enough of a convincing motive for me. Skinny always expects money to come out of his actions."

"Well, I'm not capable of any more great feats of thought tonight," Pete said and then yawned once more. He stretched. "Ouch!"

"The situation has not yet been fully clarified." Jupiter was still sitting upright on his mattress. "There are definitely still some points to be discussed."

“Can’t we continue tomorrow? I can hardly keep my eyes open.” Pete pulled his blanket up to the tip of his nose. “Have a restful night.”

“Thank you.”

However, the night was only restful for Jupiter. Pete and Bob felt their wounds even in their sleep and incorporated them into their dreams.

Mrs Crenshaw was horrified, to say the least, when she saw Bob and Pete in daylight. The frying pan almost fell out of her hands at the sight of them.

“This is even worse than yesterday.” She stroked Pete across the hair.

“Don’t, Mum!” He evaded her.

“It’s hard to imagine what could have happened. You always hear these terrible stories about fights that end badly.” She sighed. “—And how could that happen?”

“Oh, we just had a little disagreement. Nothing bad,” said Pete.

“Who can understand you boys?” Mrs Crenshaw shook her head uncomprehendingly. Then she loaded the boys’ plates with pancakes.

“Let’s get back to yesterday’s event,” said Jupe when he had finished the first batch. “I’m still thinking about what Bob said.”

“—And what did I say?” Bob asked as he poured himself some milk.

“You said in your account of what happened at the camp that you felt someone was playing a game with you.”

“That’s right,” Bob replied, “but then I suspected the Seven Pines people.”

“Pete and I detected a connection between the Seven Pines people and the red-haired woman you saw with Skinny at the petrol station,” explained Jupiter.

“You mean Roxy and that officer?” muttered Bob. Then he dropped his fork. It clanged on the plate. Everyone cringed. “Hold on a second! That wasn’t Roxy!”

“What?” asked Pete. “Roxy? Officer? Not Roxy? You’re talking in riddles, Bob.”

“The woman I saw at the petrol station that time with Skinny and the other man was Bee —Paul’s ex-girlfriend! And before you ask, Paul is the man whose pet iguana was kidnapped.”

“Bee? Then there are two red-haired women?”

“Yes! And this Bee also wears colourful, fancy clothes.” Bob tried to put the pictures together in his head—the purple Beetle, Skinny, the man with the crew cut, the conversation at the petrol station… “Hmm… Bee was with Skinny and the crew-cut officer who was filling in for Sheriff Brewer when he was sick.”

“We don’t know if that officer really works for the sheriff,” Jupiter suspected. “Maybe he’s a phoney. As it is, we are dealing with a thoroughly planned revenge game—a game that so far is running according to Bee’s rules… The dispute over the Freeman grounds provided Beatrix Fraser with the perfect opportunity to play both parties against each other. She wants to teach a lesson to the people who let her down.”

“Why? What have Paul and Mr Fraser been up to?”

“Other things were more important to them than Beatrix, for example, the bonsai, or the iguana… and today Mr Fraser is even skipping a birthday dinner with his daughter because his prized houseplant has been stolen. I can understand that this hurts her.”

“Well, the people you like the most can probably hurt you the most,” Bob said.

“That’s right. Both figuratively and literally.” Pete carefully felt for a sore spot above his right eyebrow.

"It's reasonable to assume that Beatrix wanted their undivided attention just that one time," Jupe added. "That's why she made sure neither of them got a moment's peace."

"Yes, that would fit." Bob looked down at the remains of his pancakes. "Come to think of it, it occurs to me that originally Paul and his girlfriend Roxy were supposed to go to the shop. That officer, or whoever he really is, would have attacked those two, not Mina and me. The only reason we were there was because both Paul and Roxy went to the car mechanic."

"A good point! If Beatrix Fraser is indeed behind the drama in the shop, we can assume that she wanted to give Paul a scare."

"—And not just that," Bob added. "Bee had the officer appear to intimidate us. She had to make sure we wouldn't go to the police because then her game would have been over."

"We?" asked Pete, confused. "Why should we go to the police?"

"Not us—not The Three Investigators!" Bob rolled his eyes. "I meant by 'we' the campers."

"Oh!" Pete reached for his orange juice. "Now I understand."

"As Bee's great-aunt, Mrs McGowan must have her address," Bob said, "so we can go and confront her."

"We should definitely get the address. However, I would like to refrain from the sledgehammer method," Jupiter replied calmly. "We have no solid evidence at this point that Bee is actually behind all this. So far it is only conjecture based on our logical deductions. In other words, we need a confession—or proof."

Jupiter took over the call to their client. The old lady gave him Beatrix's phone number and address in Los Angeles.

"There we have our tree burglar and iguana kidnapper," said Pete contentedly when Jupiter had hung up. "Shall we call or go straight there?"

"We'll get to her by phone first." Jupiter reached for the receiver again and switched on the loudspeaker so that his colleagues could listen in.

A woman answered on the other end of the line. "Yeah?"

"My name is Malcolm Brown. Is Beatrix available?" said Jupiter.

"She is out, and I don't know when she'll be back. Do you want me to give her a message?"

"Yes, with pleasure. Wish her a happy birthday."

"I'll do that."

Jupiter said goodbye politely.

"Are we going to wait for her to come back?" Bob folded his arms.

"No, because she'll definitely be going somewhere today." Jupiter looked smug. "—The abandoned tyre factory on Mono Drive."

"—If she even shows up there…" Pete retorted.

"She will, Pete. For Beatrix, today is the grand final. Both groups will clash. Both are angry and ready for revenge. The situation between the Seven Pines people and the campers is about to escalate to the next level."

"Sad really… a few things that are harmless in themselves—like a piece of land or a bonsai or Mr Bill—drive these people to extremes," Bob said.

"—But that's exactly what Beatrix is about to do, if I judge her correctly. She wants to teach the people a lesson and get even… and I'd bet that she'll be at the abandoned factory in person to watch everything from up close."

“The only question is whether she will intervene,” said Bob anxiously. “How far will she let the people go in their anger? From the looks of it, it certainly won’t stop at a few nasty words today.”

“I don’t know what her plan is, but it doesn’t matter, because from now on we turn the tables,” Jupiter announced. “So far Beatrix has played the game according to her rules. The new rules, however, will be made by us.”

“I don’t quite follow you,” admitted Pete.

“I’ll make a few phone calls in a minute… and then we’ll split up. You and I, we’re going to Seven Pines. Bob, on the other hand, will rejoin the campers… as Stan Silver.”

“—And then what?”

“Then we start playing our game!” Jupiter grinned.

## 16. Explosive Atmosphere

Bob sat in the back seat of Josh's old Jeep. They drove along the road through the coastal mountains. Behind the Jeep, Paul and Roxy, the San Diego boys, a few of Josh's friends, Blaine and the other campers drove in a long column of old cars.

"Skinny hurriedly went off last night," Josh said, "supposedly to get you back from those Seven Pines slimeballs… but he didn't come back."

"Honestly, there are some things about Skinny you should know," Bob said timidly, "but that can wait until later."

"We were worried," added Mina, "about Skinny, but especially about you."

The car turned a corner. Now Mono Drive was directly in front of them—a lonely road leading to the factory site.

On the horizon, Bob saw the gloomy concrete buildings. A chain-link fence surrounded the sprawling area, protecting it from unwanted intruders, but the main gate was off its hinges. A rusty 'Danger: No Trespassing' sign dangled from a post.

"Very inviting…" said Mina.

The convoy rolled onto the car park. Approaching, the factory looked even more gloomy than from a distance. The east wing by the large car park had collapsed. Only the main building and the south wing were still standing.

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Paul as he joined them at the Jeep.

"Me too." Roxy looked up at the empty window cavities. A pigeon fluttered up. "If something goes wrong, it could be dangerous."

Bob did not answer. Roxy was right, but he couldn't admit that. He just had to trust that Jupiter's plan was working.

Josh glanced at his watch. "It's almost six. We have to hurry."

"Are we really going in there?" Mina's voice trembled as she approached the main door. There was a warning sign here as well: 'Danger: Do Not Enter'. "I'm sure that's not hanging there for nothing."

"They have to put some warning like that," Roxy commented, "but I'm sure it's all locked up."

"No, someone has already gained access." Bob pointed to a heavy iron chain lying on the floor. "The door must have been secured with that."

"It doesn't matter. We don't have time to lose," Paul said and pushed open the double doors.

The others followed him down a corridor from which deserted offices led off. At the end of the corridor was the entrance to the production hall.

"No one here…" Paul and the others looked around.

The lower windows were all barricaded with boards. Only from the upper windows, six metres above, did the evening light filter through to them. It cast long squares on the concrete floor. In the corners, however, were deep shadows. A metallic sound made them flinch.

"What was that?" Paul looked around.

"I don't know," Bob murmured. He put his head back and looked up at the ceiling. A ramified system of pipes and metal struts stretched above them.

“So where are those slimeballs from Seven Pines now?” Blaine asked.

Instead of an answer, they heard the deep sound of several vehicles arriving outside the fence.

“They’re here!” whispered Mina. She looked at Bob with fear-filled eyes.

“Here we go!” growled Paul. “Take your positions!”

Jupiter and Pete got out of the MG. Mr Fraser came towards them with long strides. In his olive-coloured camouflage, he could easily have been mistaken for the leader of an underground organization. Jupe thought the outfit was a bit over the top. On the other hand, it might even help his plan.

Mr Fraser hooked his thumbs behind the wide belt of his cargo pants. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“We’ll deal with it, Mr Fraser,” said Jupiter calmly. “In any case, we have to settle this issue once and for all.”

“Then we’ll go in there now,” the man decided. He gave a signal to his neighbours and they nodded back.

“The buildings are a touch too dilapidated for me,” Pete said quietly to Jupiter as he walked. “—And you saw the sign on the fence—‘Danger: No Trespassing’.”

Jupiter was about to answer something when a series of explosions went off in the south wing at the back. The remaining glass from the high windows rained down on the car park. Plumes of smoke rose into the evening air.

“Was that an explosion?” Mr Fraser stared at the building, aghast.

“More likely a few firecrackers,” Jupiter said. “These show effects are only meant to incite you further.”

“I thought we were making the rules now!” Mr Davis said angrily.

“I thought so too,” Pete murmured.

“Well, I won’t stand for that!” Mr Fraser started moving again. “I’m going in there now and seeing this through.” He pushed open the double doors of the main building. “Come on, let’s go!”

“Is this part of the plan?” asked Mina. They had all heard the explosions elsewhere in the building.

“That’s just to intimidate us,” said Bob.

At the same moment, the outlines of at least fifteen men appeared in the entrance to the production hall. “Where’s my bonsai?” a deep voice roared.

“You slimeballs!” Paul pushed two of the San Diego boys aside and stepped forward. “First give me back my iguana!”

A slight tremor shook the earth. Was it another explosion? Or perhaps an earthquake? Bob clenched his hands into fists.

“Give me back my tree,” Fraser said, voice shaking with rage. “Right now!”

“What tree? I have nothing to do with it!” Paul shouted back. “You took my iguana. I want it back!”

Mr Fraser leaned in, teeth clenched. “This is your last warning!”

“Bring it on, old man!”

“Enough is enough!”

“Okay, you asked for it!”

Again, there was a dull rumble. The few remaining panes of glass in the windows shook. The metallic sound rang out again. The pipes above them groaned.

Paul took another step forward, and his people gathered behind him. The next moment, Paul took out his dagger and pointed it at Mr Fraser.

"Put that down!" Mr Fraser cautioned as the rest of the Seven Pines people moved slowly and menacingly towards Paul.

"It's too late! You can't scare us!"

Suddenly, there was another crash, this time in the back rooms. Someone was providing explosive background noise. So it seemed Beatrix Fraser wanted to end her showdown with a bang, but The Three Investigators were about to throw a spanner in the works.

Both groups were now face to face. Moments later, madness took over.

Paul and Mr Fraser hurled themselves at each other, colliding in the centre of the hall with their hands locked over the dagger. Around them, the wider melee raged as fighters grappled in close quarters.

Cement dust trickled down from the ceiling, but the fighters barely seemed to notice it. Their fight appeared almost ferocious.

Just then, Roxy let out a shrill scream. Paul began to stagger as he grabbed his chest, where a large red spot quickly spread. At the same time, Mr Fraser stumbled backwards, clutching his left arm, which was already bloodied. His breath came in ragged gasps as his strength failed and his legs gave out.

As if on cue, the others stopped moving and turned to face the injured. Paul had slumped to the floor. Beside him, Mr Fraser writhed. Less than ten seconds later, both lay motionless.

Only Roxy's sobs could be heard. "They're… are they really…"

There was movement in the shadows. A figure dressed all in black jumped out from behind a stack of old pallets.

"Daddy! Paul!" She ran towards the men and knelt beside her father.

"Your game's up, Miss Fraser!" Jupiter called out.

"Huh? Wha—what… are you talking about?" she continued in a tear-stained voice.

"It doesn't matter now. You wanted to prove that a piece of land, a tree and an iguana are worth less than a beloved person… and in the process you snuffed out two human lives."

"No!" Beatrix Fraser looked up and stared around with her eyes widened in terror. She slapped her hands in front of her face. She could hardly speak. "—But I… I didn't mean to. I really didn't. So believe me! I was just trying to teach all of you a lesson!"

The crowd was hanging on her every word when—out of the blue—a force from nowhere slammed into them, and everything started to shake violently!

## 17. A Crumbling Nightmare

The ground trembled. This time everyone was sure—it was not an explosion or a show effect, but an earthquake!

"We have to get out of here!" yelled Josh.

The heavy lamps on the ceiling shook. The metal struts creaked and groaned. One earth tremor followed the next. Now the rusty pillars also began to shake. A corrugated iron cladding fell down from a scaffold.

"Wait! We have to take Daddy and Paul with us!" cried Beatrix desperately.

At the same moment, her face took on an expression of horror and relief at the same time, for both men sat up.

"—But…" she stammered. "You're alive? You're alive!"

"No time to explain." Mina took Beatrix by the arm. "We have to get out of here, otherwise we'll all die—for real!" Not five metres from her, one of the lamps crashed to the ground.

The group of panicked individuals moved frantically, each person desperate to escape the hall first. They rushed towards the corridor leading to the exit.

Bob found himself at the back of the line, watching as one by one, they pushed through the door at the corridor's end, escaping into the open air.

Just as Beatrix made it out, Bob heard her exclaim, "Skinny! Skinny is still in there!"

Bob froze, rooted to the ground. Skinny was here? Was he the one who had set off the explosions? Was he still at the back of the factory? It was reckless to stay, but Skinny was in grave danger!

"I have to go find him!" Beatrix shouted.

"No, Bee, it's danger—" That was Mina, but that was all Bob heard before the door slammed shut. Dust and mortar rained down on him. He sensed that the corridor could collapse at any moment.

Determined, Bob turned and rushed back into the hall. Just as he did that, the ceiling above the corridor collapsed with a thunderous crash behind him. He turned to see chunks of concrete smashing to the floor, sealing off the exit completely. He was trapped in the building!

Without hesitation, he sprinted across the hall, narrowly dodging a steel girder that smashed into a partition wall with a thunderous impact. His heart pounded in his chest. He had to look for Skinny and then find another way out of this crumbling nightmare.

This was not his first earthquake. As a Californian, Bob had experienced many earthquakes, including some stronger ones. Every child learned the most important rules from an early age. One of them was to immediately find a place where they could not be hit by falling objects.

With adrenaline pumping through his veins, Bob reached the back of the hall. There had to be another exit there—perhaps an emergency exit.

Just then, he felt the earth calming beneath his feet. The tremors subsided, then stopped altogether… but that didn't mean he was safe. A second quake could strike at any moment. This was his opportunity to escape into the open.

The only light in the hall was a dim glow filtering through the high windows near the ceiling. A corridor stretched out before him, lined with several doors. Heart pounding, Bob raced on, flinging doors open one after another. One led into a broom cupboard, the next into an office. There were no windows anywhere. Very soon, he realized that he had reached a dead end—there was no way out.

Suddenly, he felt a slight tremor. Was it starting again? He quickly turned around and ran back… only to nearly collide with someone in the corridor.

"Stan? What are you doing here?" It was Skinny!

"Uh… I came to look for you."

"Why? Never mind. Get outside quick, before the building collapses!"

"The exit is blocked!"

"There is a second one! In the south wing. Come on!"

Bob followed Skinny through the corridors. Again and again, they had to make detours because broken pipes, ladders or fallen bricks were in the way. Some corridors had already collapsed completely. Bob no longer believed there was a way out—until Skinny led him to a door with a broken 'Exit' sign above it.

"Come on quick!" shouted Skinny. He was already running towards the door. Bob wanted to follow him, but then the ground started to shake again.

There was a huge commotion just outside the fence—which was at a safe distance from the abandoned factory building. Everyone was talking around in confusion. Jupiter was the only one who didn't let himself be distracted. They were safe! Here they could not be hit by flying pieces of concrete or broken glass. His plan had worked despite the unexpected earthquake.

Everyone had escaped without harm—the people from Seven Pines, the campers from the Freeman grounds, Pete, and…

Jupiter looked around. Bob was missing! Immediately, he grabbed hold of Pete and told him.

"We can't leave Skinny in there!" Beatrix Fraser exclaimed, her voice choked with emotion.

"Is there another exit?" Mr Davis asked, as calmly as he could.

"At the back by the south wing!" Beatrix replied, her voice trembling.

"Come on! Before it's too late!" Mr Davis urged, though Pete had already dashed back through the gate, with Jupe following closely. Bob's life was at stake!

Bob stumbled. He hit the ground lengthways. He felt dizzy. The exertion of the last few days had been enough without an earthquake. Now his body just gave out.

"Come on!" Skinny yelled at him.

Bob struggled to his feet as the floor trembled beneath him. A towering wooden frame, barely clinging to the wall, loomed ominously, threatening to crash down at any moment. He heard wood creaking, as dust and splinters danced wildly around him. Scattered boards lay strewn across the floor like a battlefield.

The tremor grew stronger again. Suddenly, a wooden post came loose, fell to the ground and jammed Bob's left leg. "Aaaargh! Help!"

"What happened?"

"My leg is stuck! I can't move!"

Determined to reach Bob, Skinny shoved aside the remnants of a rack, scrambled over scattered boards, and clung to an iron beam. Above them, the ceiling lamps swung back and

forth.

"Are you all right?" Skinny shouted, his voice laced with urgency.

"I need help!" Bob gasped, his voice barely audible over the chaos.

With one hand gripping the beam, Skinny used his other hand to yank the wooden post away, freeing Bob's trapped leg. Then he grabbed Bob by the arm.

"Get up!" Skinny urged, releasing the beam. "Quick, before this place collapses!"

Just then, the ground shook violently. Skinny clung to the beam again, without letting go of Bob. "We have to get out now!"

"I can't make it!" Bob shouted, panic in his eyes.

"Yes, we can!" Skinny insisted. "Get up and climb over these boards!"

"I know, but my leg hurts!" Bob's voice was strained with pain as he reached for the beam, pulling himself up. His knees felt like they were made of pudding. Skinny supported him over the boards. A thunderous crash erupted behind them, but they didn't dare look back.

Seconds later, Skinny wrenched the door open, and they burst into the open air. The last rays of the evening sun lit up the swirling dust, creating a surreal dance of light. The two of them hobbled to a safe distance away from the building.

Skinny laughed, breathless with relief. They were saved!

"We did it!" said Bob incredulously as they stood in the open—dusty, filthy from top to bottom, but alive.

"It's still dangerous to be in this area. Who knows if the building won't collapse altogether." Skinny said. "Can you walk out to the front of the fence by yourself?"

"I… think so," Bob muttered, still trying to catch his breath.

"All right," Skinny said, "I'll have to go off now. See you around, Stan!"

"Hey, Skinny…" Bob said. "Your game's over… I'm not Stan. My name is Bob… Bob Andrews."

"Uh-huh…"

Just then, about a hundred metres away, Bob noticed several people running towards them.

Skinny had obviously noticed them too—particularly the two in front. "Well, the cavalry's coming for you," he remarked. "I'll be off before Baby Fatso starts making long speeches, or Coward Crenshaw starts threatening me." He turned to leave.

"One moment, Skinny!"

"What is it?"

"Why did you risk your own life to save me?"

"Hey, you came looking for me as well!" Skinny replied with a wry smile. "You're my friend, Stan! Remember? The very best! But don't expect me to always be around to save you!"

With that, he ran off into the darkness.

## 18. Back to Normal

After a Tuesday that was almost restfully uneventful, The Three Investigators met with the campers on the Freeman grounds on Wednesday afternoon.

The danger they had faced at the factory two days ago was still very fresh in their minds. Bob had made it back outside the fence with the help of his friends, and several others from both groups—the Seven Pines people and the campers. After that, the entire group had stood there to catch their breath. The tremors had stopped, and the building remained as it was—at least from the outside.

Regarding Jupiter's game plan, Mr Fraser and Paul had played their parts brilliantly, and Beatrix had confessed to everything.

Now, Jupiter, Pete and Bob had a big basket of raisin buns with them, which Mrs McGowan had donated out of sheer gratitude. Everyone except Paul, however, preferred to help themselves to the potato chips and chocolate that Roxy passed around.

Mina lifted an old peanut butter jar filled with cola. "Here's to The Three Investigators who managed to uncover a great conspiracy!" The others raised their glasses too.

Jupiter waved it off. "Beatrix Fraser never intended to put you all in mortal danger."

"—But she put up with us fighting with the Seven Pines people—over renting a piece of land, a mascot, a tree and an iguana," Josh said.

"She felt ignored by her family and rejected by her friends," Jupiter explained, "so she staged a feud between the two groups out of a desperate desire to prove she could no longer be brushed aside."

Mina added, "She did confess that it was her plan to come out of hiding after the first exchange of blows. She had prepared a speech especially for that."

"We don't get to hear it now," Paul said with amusement, "but I don't care about that. What matters is that she gave Mr Bill back to me."

"That beast is all that matters in your life!" growled Roxy.

"Paul is incapable of learning from disasters." Mina laughed, but it didn't come across as entirely cheerful.

"For that, Bee's father has decided to sit down with her," Bob said. "I hope he gives her a second chance."

"He won't report her?" asked Mina.

"No, the tree is back… and it looks better than ever. Apparently the excitement has done it a world of good." Pete grinned.

"I won't report Bee either," said Paul, "but I still won't talk to her."

"It might never have come to this if everyone had spoken reasonably to each other," mused Bob.

"Yeah, maybe…" Paul reached for another raisin bun. "—But who knows?"

"Whatever happened to Bee's other helper?" Bob asked. "—The man with the crew cut?"

"Jason Connor is an actor from Bee's current circle of friends," Roxy explained, "just like Skinny, he was supposed to cause trouble on her behalf. That's why he posed as the officer."

“I don’t believe it!” Mina sank down on a chair and helped herself some chips. “I thought the police were actually out to get us.”

“So what’s going to happen to Skinny?” asked Josh. “Is he going to prison?”

The campers looked distressed. Bob could understand them. Skinny had cheated on them, but he was one of them, having lived by their side, albeit only for a short time.

“He lied, trashed gardens on Bee’s behalf and cut your cables,” Jupiter said, “but if no one among you or the Seven Pines people reports him, he’ll probably remain at large.”

“At least he may have saved Bob’s life by intervening,” Mina added.

“Yeah,” Bob muttered. “Skinny can be a real creep, but he has a good side too.”

“Well, not really,” Pete said with raised eyebrows. “Just think of all the cases we’ve had to deal with him… and think of how he lied to you. He told you that you were a smoker and his best friend. I honestly don’t know which is worse.”

“I…” Bob began.

“What?” asked Pete, visibly amused.

“Oh, nothing.” Bob leaned back.

“Say it.”

“You know, it may sound strange, but I think he jumped at the chance to get what he never had.”

“Power?” asked Jupiter.

“Revenge, I think,” Pete guessed.

“No…” Mina looked thoughtfully over at Bob. “I think what Bob means is friends.”

“Yes,” Bob agreed. “He took advantage of my memory loss and used me by pretending to be my friend…”

“Sure… a dubious friend indeed,” Pete remarked.

They were silent for a moment until Pete reached for a Coke bottle and turned to Josh and Mina. “What actually happened to your conversation with Mr Freeman yesterday?”

Mina smiled. “It was a bit strange. Somehow it went very differently than planned. We all met together at his ranch. The people from Seven Pines were there too.”

“—And they were much nicer than expected,” Josh said. “Eventually, they agreed to share the grounds with us. We have been allocated the northern section, which covers this current camping ground and the dirt path to the main road. They get the southern section adjacent to the beach, along with a pathway directly connecting to their place.”

“—But then you mustn’t be hostile to each other anymore,” said Bob.

“It’s not going to be easy. To be on the safe side, we’ll put up a fence first. We don’t want those slimeballs getting too close to us!” Paul laughed. “There’s no question of friendship there yet, but we will certainly do without small quarrels in the future.”

“We even decided that there should be a gate in the fence,” said Mina.

“I’m strongly against that!” announced Paul.

“You’ve been outvoted.” Josh patted him on the back.

“Then everything is in order,” Pete rejoiced.

“Well, apart from our bruises and the fact that my parents are going to lynch me,” Bob said quietly. He took a raisin bun and bit into it.

“You’ll live.” Pete patted him on the shoulder amicably. “Hey, you’ve been through tougher situations.”

“Exactly!” added Jupiter. “If you can eat one of these buns, nothing will knock you out!”

That evening, as Bob was making a sandwich in the kitchen, the telephone rang and he answered it.

"Hello?"

"Bob?" It was his father!

Pete's mother had promised to get in touch with Bob's parents. He himself had not dared. How could he explain to his parents that he had lost his memory for several days, lived with his arch-enemy in a construction trailer and beaten up his best friend? They would not have believed him—especially after their family argument last Friday.

"Yes?" He was already feeling a little queasy. What would come now? Would his father get upset? Was he angry with him? Or still disappointed?

For a moment, Bob held his breath, but after just a few words from his father, he knew that his parents were no longer angry with him.

Relieved, he leaned back. As he did so, his eyes fell on a card held to the fridge door by a magnet—the business card of The Three Investigators.

"I'm glad everything is back to normal," said his father.

Bob took the card and looked down at the last line:

*Records & Research: Bob Andrews*

"Me too!" he said.